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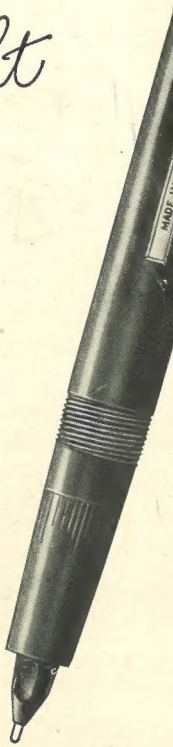

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NOVEMBER ISSUE PUBLISHED OCTOBER 4TH!

VOLUME XLVII | OCTOBER, 1946 | NUMBER 2

Three Complete Western Novels

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Jimmy Dunn Deals the Boothill Ace!.....Walt Coburn 34
From the Mexican Border to the Canadian Line rode Jimmy Dunn, carrying in his jeans—the Ace-of-Spades command for his own execution!

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Mark Sherry's calling card read: "I'm carrying ten thousand dollars cattle money from Dodge. I intend to ride on with it. Anybody object?"

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Why did Dan Clintock take that black fifty-yard damnation trail when he knew, at the end of the snapping, frozen guide-rope—was stark blizzard death?

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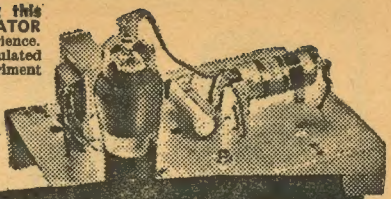

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IN THE SADDLE

EVERY now and then, like the crack of a Forty-Nine ribbon-popper's old bull-whip, something symbolic of the deathless American West jumps out of the never-never land of the past and smacks the city slickers of these modern United States squarely in their teeth.

Pardner, they had a cattle stampede in the damn Yankee town of Boston, Massachusetts, several weeks ago! Yes, siree—a real, honest-to-God stampede!

We'll bet a cartwheel that some of those boot-tough, grizzled forty-rod-guzzling old-timers who used to make the drive from the South Concho to the Pecos across the Llano Estacado would give a great belly laugh if they were around to hear tell of the steer stampede in New England.

About fifty critters, weighing an average of one thousand pounds and valued by the Massachusetts buyers at $75,000, broke loose from an abattoir during the night and raised holy hell with the Boston cowhands.

The rannahans—or the Boston Metropolitan Police, if you will—drew their rifles from patrol car scabbards and, after a long run, got the herd to milling and finally under control.

But there was an anti-climax. Two tough old steers bulled their way clear of the cocktail guard and rumbled into the Charles River. They had to be chased by a police launch to the opposite shore, where they were finally roped and thrown.

The yarn of steers running wild through the streets of a city like Boston in 1946 sounds funny. Seeing as how nobody got hurt, it probably was funny, too. But, back in the days when America was young, a stampede, as any cow country-bred kid of today can tell you, was mighty dangerous.

Take that Texas drive from the South Concho to the Pecos, as an example. This was a waterless stretch of perhaps one hundred miles, and it took men, horses and cattle two days to make it.

No delay was brooked. Delay would be fatal. The trail drivers were as thirsty as the critters they prodded along, but they at least had strong black coffee to wet their throats. The animals had nothing.

So it was to be expected that when the herd scented the water of the Pecos River, anything was liable to happen—and frequently did. Tongues swollen in their mouths, dull brains tormented by the pitiless heat, throats giving out a terrible moaning, the dumb, enormous critters could easily go berserk unless watched constantly by the rugged, leathery riders on their flanks and drag. Many times the tense herd did break and it was then that cowboys lost their lives trying to stop the maddened beasts from running blindly over a bluff in the desperate race for the life-giving water.

The Frontier bore tough cattle—and tough, fighting men! The riders of the Old West wolfed down their "John Chinaman," dried apples or prunes, "blackstrap," meat, bread and Arbuckle day after day. Day after day they worked, slept, fought and slept again—when they had a chance. And they watched—and were swept along with the rising social tide—while barb wire, farmers and town law transformed the free, open range into surveyed, fenced-in little kingdoms.

But while the old-timers, with their sixguns, blistering profanity and square-dealing, man-to-man code, were on the stage, the civilized world held its breath and watched the forging of a nation in sweat, blood, powdersmoke and Boot-hill crosses.

Foreign politicians schemed against America—witness the Mexican and Civil Wars—but at the same time they and their down-trodden, hopeless masses stood amazed at what the men of our "barbarian" West could do, pitted against the seemingly unconquerable and hostile wilderness.

That little item in the newspapers about how fifty old steers stampeded in Boston town isn't of great importance. But if it brings back, to even a single mind, a picture of the greatness of the Old West, it has, we believe, served its purpose. We have great ranges, great ranchers and cattlemen today in the Southwest. They trace their histories back to the early days. But they cannot match the dead Old-timers. They were the pioneers who had to succeed—or else. . . .

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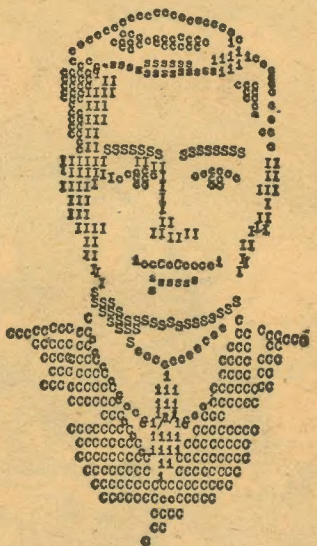

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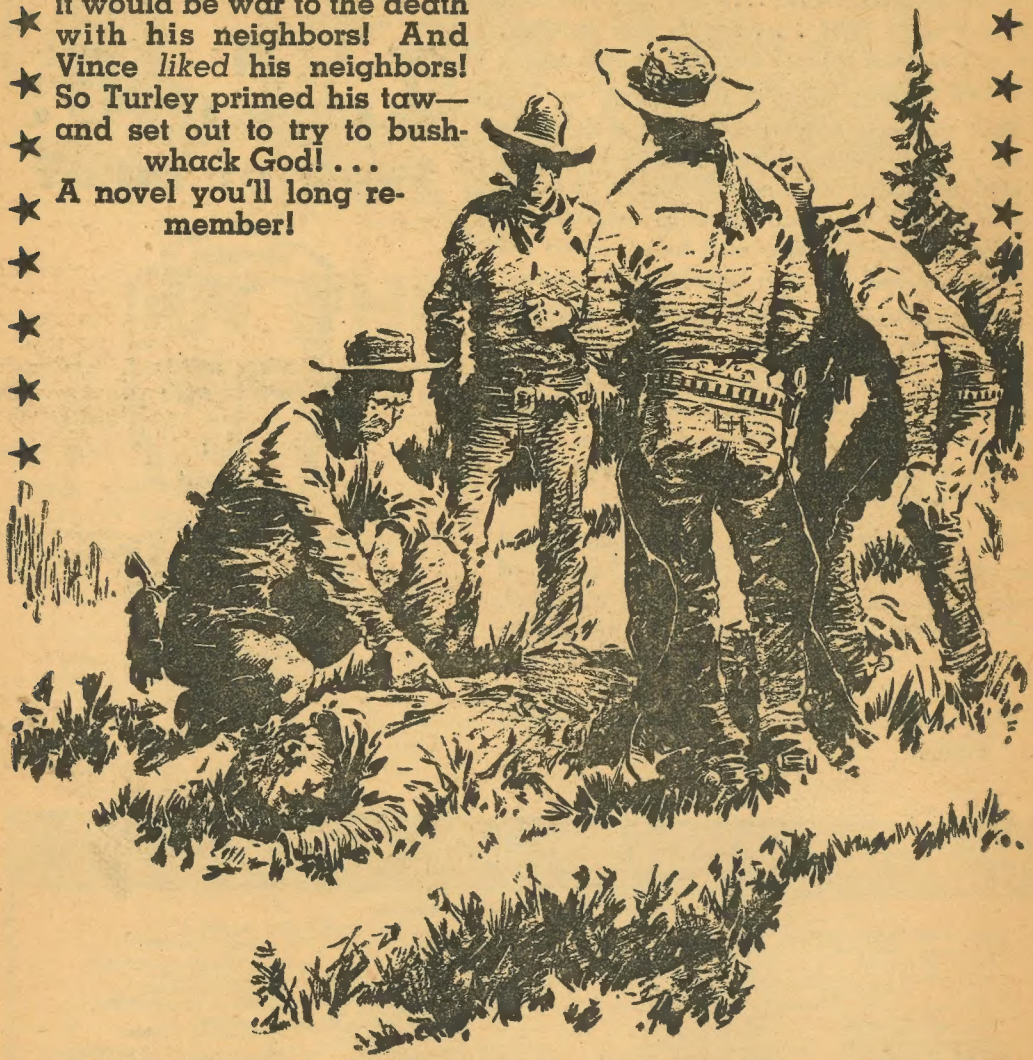

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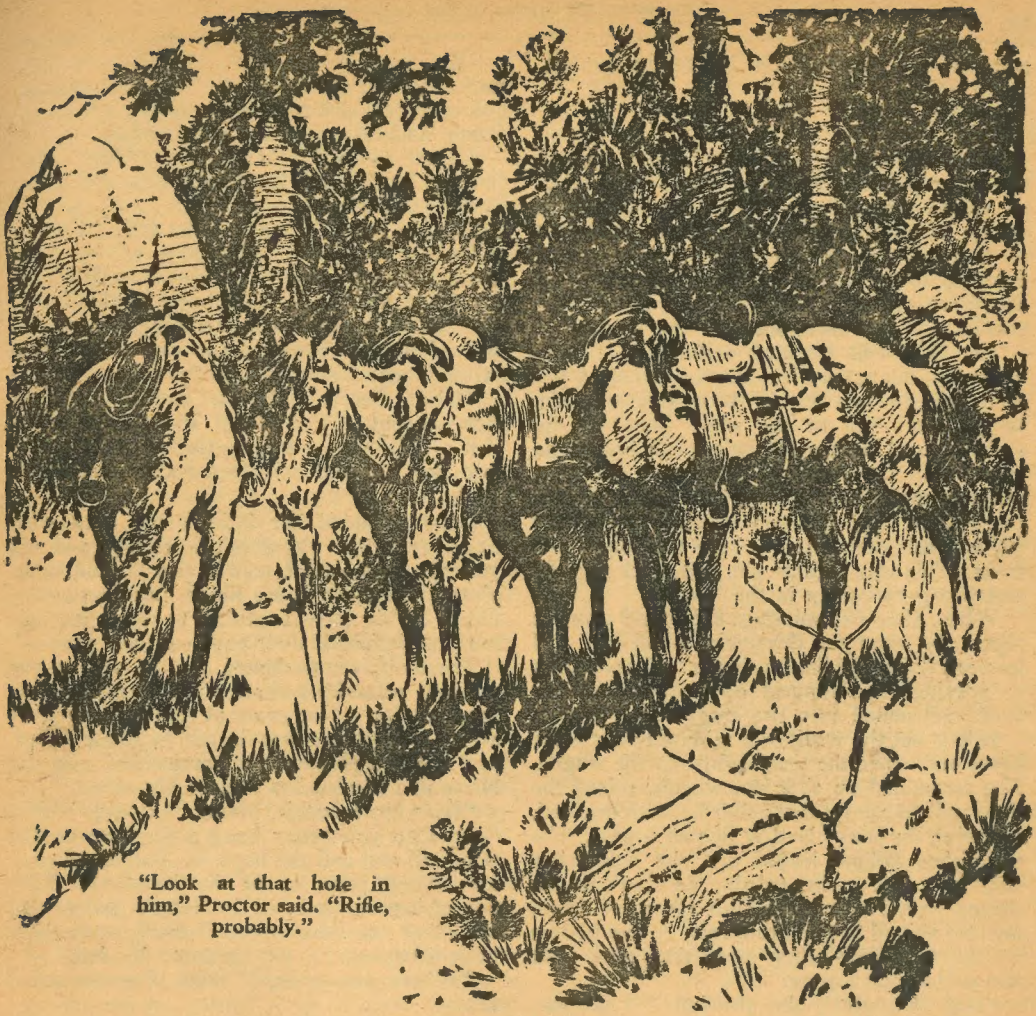

"Look at that hole in him," Proctor said. "Rifle, probably."

CHAPTER ONE

.45 Colt Call

THE man on the little brown horse never knew what struck him. After the slug knocked him forward he toppled from the worn saddle so that his face was lost for an instant in the little horse's mane. His feet, in their shabby boots, yielded up the brush-scarred, wooden stirrups limply.

He hit the ground beside a clump of sagebrush and settled into a pathetic pile. The little old brown horse moved away a few feet and stood looking back at the man. In the animal's rheumy, half-blind eyes were uncertainty and mild fright. But in its sixteen years the little beast had almost lost its capacity for panic.

Not until the *boom* of a far-off rifle sounded, bellowing and re-echoing with heavy-caliber timber from height to peak to crag, did the horse become frightened. Reins dragging, it trotted down the trail at its stiff old best for perhaps a hundred yards. The gun sounding no more, the animal began to graze, pulling at a clump of tough buffalo grass gray with dust.

The only sound then in all that desert was the full *clunk* of the horse's

teeth on the mild snaffle bit as he grazed.

* * *

A mile away, in a different valley and on the other side of the range of sub-mountains, an eleven-year-old girl sat in the shade of a spring wagon. A plump horse was tethered to a tie-weight, dozing in the shafts. Scattered about the wagon were thirty-six blooded shorthorn heifers, fat, gentle, aristocratic yearlings of fine roan and red and white.

The child was working arithmetic. It was Saturday, but school had started the week before, and she was one of those kids who like to get work out of the way. She had the stubby pencil at her lips when she heard the rifle fired. Its bellow rolled down a distant canyon toward her, magnified as through a megaphone. She squinted, sucking at the pencil, and calculated from where the sound had come. This was because she had quick instinct and was growing up in the West.

When, after two minutes, the sound was not repeated—when the thirty-six fat heifers had lowered their questioning heads and gone back to grazing—she jumped up and pitched her book and pencil into the wagon.

It was but the work of a minute to untie the horse and heave the tie-weight into the wagon. She scrambled up over the wheels, seized the line, and cut the fat mare sharply with one end, snapping the heavy leather like an expert. The astonished animal leaped and she pulled her sharply to the right, turning as short as the wagon would allow. She hit the mare again and the animal broke into a trot. A few heifers started to follow—they were that tame—but she set too fast a pace.

"Git, Pet, git!" she shrilled. "That was Bill Turley's big lion gun. Git along there! Can't you shake out of a trot, you old fool? Oh, Lord, Lord!"

The girl was first to sense murder. The first to creep at the *feel,* the touch of murder. Later the atmosphere of death was to enshroud many, but when she lashed the fat old mare into her father's yard and screamed for him to come out, Garfield Proctor's first reaction was annoyance.

"Left the heifers, did you! And you've run pore old Pet half to death. I've a good mind to larrup you, child!" he said.

But he did nothing of the sort. A gentle, easy-going man, as are so many big men, he had never laid a hand on his daughter in all of her eleven years. He had been shrinking a wagon tire in the blacksmith shop and his face and hands were covered with soot from the forge. He smudged the child, lifting her down, and he held her in one arm while he unhitched the mare, watered her and turned her, still harnessed, into a dry corral.

"But Pop, it was Bill Turley's big gun—I *heard* it!" the child sobbed. "He was up there near the post-oak park—you know, where we found old Lottie with her colt last Spring."

"There, there! What if it was Bill? And, besides, how do you know where he was?" the father comforted her.

"By the sound!" shrilled the girl. "I could tell where because of how loud it was—it came down Liscomb Canyon. And what's Bill Turley doing up there? You know yourself that that the post-oak park is the only place on this side of the ridge where you can shoot down to the Forge River trail on the other side."

"Now, Betsy," Proctor soothed. "Now, Betsy, honey! Ca'm down! Prob'ly old Bill—if it was Bill—was just up there after a mountain lion. Mebbe he's been losin' some stock lately."

Betsy pounded her father's big neck with tiny fists. "But why didn't he ride by and ask you to go up, if it was a lion? And what about those little Wells kids? Last week they didn't hardly have anything to carry in their lunch pails, and if their papa—if their papa—"

Proctor's face darkened, and he was on the point of remarking about Curt Wells, and his fondness for a fast game at stakes he couldn't afford. But there was terror in Betsy's face, and it silenced him. He carried her into the house and handed her over to his wife.

"Give her a cookie, Mama," he said shortly, "and then you better hang a sheet up on the windmill and call the boys in. Red and Frank are setting posts up at the Meadows. Send one of 'em out to bring in Betsy's heifers and the other one into town. I don't want them heifers left out for the varmints, by dad."

"Where you going?" Mrs. Proctor asked him.

"Town," he said shortly. "You better make Red go after the heifers. I don't want that wild whelp in town. Goodbye, sugarfoot."

He stooped and kissed the little girl, who seemed calmer. In fact she looked like a child who has stirred up an inexcusable something. A child overcome by babyish guilt. It was as though Betsy now regretted her dramatics and recalled her own fear with a good deal of skepticism.

But Garfield Proctor's face remained somber as he went out the kitchen door. He was the kind of man who became absent-minded under emotional strain or the burden of deep thought. He had to come back and get his gun out of the kitchen cupboard, where it had lain for months on the top shelf. The belt was stiff, the scabbard had green mold on the worn brass studs.

He squinted down the gun barrel, snapped the cylinder shut and went out, carrying the weapon in one hand and buckling the belt with the other. His wife knew better than to

say anything. They had come to California after three years of disastrous Arizona sheep wars. That was five years ago, but she had not forgotten the feeling of seeing her man go out with that gun, that look on his face—of wondering if he would ride back.

Proctor went to the machine shop, drew an oiled rag through the gun barrel and squinted through it again. His heavy face showed satisfaction. The rifling was sharp and clean, the lands high, the grooves square-cut and well defined. He loaded the gun and, from a box on a high shelf in the shed, took down a handful of .45 bullets, which he fed into the belt until all its eyes were full. Eight bullets were left in the box. He dropped them into his shirt's right pocket.

Proctor saddled a horse and rode out of the yard at a trot. He never put his gun on but what he recalled that he could have worn two notches in it, if he had a mind to. His brother, now—Tom had worn his notches; but Tom wasn't a family man. Tom hadn't a kid growing up.

He saw his wife climb the windmill tower and hang a sheet to the vane, the signal for the first of their five cowhands who saw it to come in.

"I hope it's Red that goes after the heifers. I wisht I'd made it positive," Proctor said. "Chances are, this is a wildgoose chase, but he'll be pickin' himself a fight out of it anyhow."

IT WAS growing dark by the time the man up at the head of Liscomb Canyon, in the post-oak park, mounted his horse. A man had to expose himself to the Proctor side of the range two or three times, coming out of Liscomb, and he wanted to do it after dark had fallen. He tried to fit his big gun into the straps which, in lieu of a boot, carried it, but it was a tight fit and he was nervous and in a hurry. He carried the big gun under his arm as he rode pell-mell down the canyon. It was dark where he rode, although there was still an hour of sunshine down on the flats, an hour-and-a-half up on the peaks.

* * *

Red Magoffin and Frank Wylie saw Mrs. Proctor's signal at the same time. They were glad to be called in, because they had been setting posts for six days straight, Sunday and all, and any excuse to leave was welcome. They gleefully piled their tools and rode pell-mell down.

Half way to the house they intercepted Berea Holt. Holt, a bearded old man with three fingers gone from his left hand, had owned his own herd years back, and had a lease on several thousand acres of good grazing land. No one knew why he had sold out; no one knew what became of the money. Talk was that a family crisis back in Missouri had been met with it, salvaging the interests of some relatives at Berea's expense.

Since then he had ridden for others, Garfield Proctor included. He had trapped in the Sierras; worked in the livery stable at Libertad. Berea had made a sizeable stake when he rounded up a bunch of quality broomtails and sold them to a cavalry buyer, and then lost his poke in a futile hunt for gold. He was a bitter, gnarled, tough and silent man, but for all that welcome anywhere.

"I seen Min Proctor flyin' a bed-sheet and I wondered what was up. You seen Gar?" he asked the cowpokes.

Red reined up only long enough to shake his head. "No, but I 'low we soon will!" he whooped. "C'm on and let's see."

Magoffin was just under twenty-five, but he looked older, and he had a strong flavor of the middle-deep South in his accent. He was not really red-haired, but he once had been, and in manhood it had turned a coppery brown which was responsible for his nickname.

He was wild—yes—he would have been the first to admit that. But his boast that he was also a good worker—that for every minute he spent fooling with guns he gave an extra minute to the boss—was also true.

Frank Wylie was an undistinguished, almost chinless tramp rider who had settled down with Gar Proctor for two seasons now because of Min Proctor's cooking. There was a lost-dog look about Wylie, an air which almost proclaimed that he had been kicked around a good deal in his youth and had not yet healed.

His were the usual cowboy vices: too much liquor without ever becoming a sot, too much fast poker without ever really developing a passion for it, and too great a fondness for the women in the honkytonks in the south end of Libertad, without ever becoming seriously involved with them. He caroused like he worked, because it was expected of him. He was as different from the whip-like, knife-sharp and constantly edgy Magoffin as a timid alley dog is from a blooded pit bull.

Red was two hundred yards ahead of Berea and Frank as he rode into the yard, despite the fact he had the poorest horse. Mrs. Proctor told him to bring up the blooded heifers, and as he watered his pony she explained Gar had gone off wearing his gun.

"He appeared to fear there might be trouble between Bill Turley and Curt Wells—bad trouble," she said.

Red freed his saddle and dropped his loop over a smart-looking buckskin who had been collecting fat in the corral for over a week. There was a preoccupied look on his face as he saddled the buckskin. He left the animal

corral tied while he made a pilgrimage to the machine shed. Mrs. Proctor heard him swearing as he discovered the ammunition gone. He went to the bunkhouse and when he returned he was stuffing his belt with cartridges.

Holt and Wylie were talking with Mrs. Proctor when Red interrupted. "Frank, you bring in them shorthorns," he said. "I'm goin' after Gar."

Before the woman could protest he was in the saddle and away. She exchanged looks with Berea Holt, as the crestfallen Wylie obediently rode out to bring in the heifers. Holt pulled at his gray whiskers.

"It's strictly guesswork on Gar's part, I guess?" he said hopefully, in the tone of a man who had in his time enjoyed a range war or two, and learned to know better. "Likely Gar had business in town, anyway, eh?"

"Oh, of course! He just isn't taking any chances, but he knows there isn't anything to it," the woman lied. Then, suddenly, she broke. Her composure vanished and she threw her apron over her head to hide her sobs.

Old Berea leaned against the corral and watched her stonily.

"Oh, why do I try to fool you?" the woman cried. "You're like Gar, you know better! He thinks Bill bushwhacked poor, harmless old Curt Wells. Oh my God, Berea, if that's so—if that poor Beatrice Wells is left with that big family and nothing to support them with—"

"Curt asked for trouble," Berea said slowly. "Bill Turley's been cracked ever since he got in that fight up to Independence and Curt ort to of knowed better than to devil him."

"I'm not takin' Curt's side," Mrs. Proctor said. "He's shif'less and he's the kind that would devil Bill if he thought he could get away with it and not get his darn' hand called. But he's a family man, Berea."

"A family man," Berea said, "can stir up just as much trouble as a single man, and leave a lot more behind when he loses. Well, here comes Frank. My, them heifers look good."

His face was wistful as he watched the fat shorthorns meander into the corral, contemptuous of Frank's noisy whooping, which would have had ordinary brush cattle scattered over two thousand acres by now.

"Come on, Frank," he said. "Let's you and me mosey into town and see what them boys air up to." He squeezed the woman's arm briefly. "Go back and stop frettin', Min," he said. "Put an old hen on to boil. You mind what I say—Gar and the boys and me will be back in time for a late supper."

Nevertheless, he stopped in the bunkhouse to rifle three bunks, until he found ammunition to fit his ancient .45, and he saw to it that Frank Wylie took plenty along also.

CHAPTER TWO

The Gambler Known as Ward

THE trail from Proctor's place to Libertad town meandered over fifteen miles of foothills, but a crow had only nine short miles in passing between the same two points. Halfway there, the trail intercepted the winding pair of ruts known as the Valley Stage Road, which led past Curt Wells' place. Wells' shabby little shack lay thirteen miles to the right, Libertad eight miles to the left.

Gar paused, debating briefly. He could satisfy himself by taking the Stage Road, but it would mean climbing the shelf and descending by way of Liscomb Canyon to return to his own place—if he found Wells alive and well. He could take the trail into Libertad. There he might or might not see Bill Turley. There he might or might not determine that a crime had been committed by and against neighbors.

It was growing dark; so he chose Libertad. He had always liked riding at night. He was fifty-three, and this was the first time that the night and a lonely trail had seemed oppressive.

"What's come over me?" he brooded. "Kid gave me the willies, I guess. Pshaw! I'll prob'ly match dimes with Bill to see who pays for the drinks and then skedaddle on home. Like as not, Curt's tied up in a poker game at Bundy's Saloon right now." But he shivered. "Easy there, hoss!" he growled. "Don't you go gettin' spooked up over nothin', too."

The coyotes had begun to sing, and he listened to their music as he swung out on the stage road. He was on that road when Red Magoffin, riding hard, caught up.

"What's up, Gar?"

"I don't know as anything's up," Proctor said carefully, "but old Bill Turley may have—just *may* have—busted loose."

"And shot Wells in the back?" Red swore. "I don't care how many kin he's got; if he orphaned that tribe of snot-nose towheads, we ort to lynch him."

"Min talks too much," Proctor said. "Now you keep your mouthy trap shut and let me do the talkin', you understand? You're just a rider—you got nothing to lose for trouble—but I *live* here. And I'm tellin' you, range wars are hard to live down."

"That's right," Red said bitterly. "I'm a saddle-bum and you're a rancher. Rub it in!"

"Now I didn't say that," Gar protested, surprised at Magoffin's reaction.

They rode on in silence.

When they strode into Bundy's, a quick glance revealed neither Turley or Wells. Proctor's heart fell. For a moment he was too confused to know what to do. Red broke the impasse by ordering drinks for them. Then

Magoffin saw someone in the poker game in the corner.

"*Buenas noches,* Ward!" he called. "Have you jiggers cleaned poor old Curt out already tonight?"

The gambler, Ward, spat out the flattened stub-end of a wheatstraw cigarette and shook his head as he dealt.

"Curt hasn't been in tonight, Magoffin," he said in a clipped, cultivated voice. "Can't understand it, because this is the eighteenth, and that shipment of Bermuda grass seed was due in tonight and he was supposed to pick it up from the stage."

Red set his glass down carefully and wiped a bead of whiskey from his chin. His eyes met Garfield Proctor's briefly. Gar laid a hand on the hard, knotty young arm.

"Bermudy grass," he said to no one in particular. "Dang it, why *will* Curt fool with them fancy-pants pastures when he ain't got water enough to irrigate a damn' old geranium?" And as the remark failed to break Red's tension, he added over his shoulder to the bartender, "Oh, yes. Has Burt been in tonight?"

"Naw," the bartender said. "Mrs. Forsythe said he had papers to serve in that lawsuit over to El Portal."

Red swore under his breath and whispered it was always that way with a sheriff: never around when you wanted him. He hitched up his pants restlessly, and his hand slid lightly over his gun-butt.

Gar saw the youngster's rage had been building up . . . building up. . . . It was partly indignation over Curt Wells' runny-nose kids, and partly that Red had never liked blustering Turley. But mostly because Red was just that age. Gar felt sick at his stomach. What did a kid like that know about killing? How it felt to kill a man, as well as how it might not be so pleasant to be killed himself? Until you had savored those twin dreads, no man could say how he would feel and act.

Gar felt pity as he looked at his red-headed rider. He might have said something more, but at that moment Berea Holt limped in. He had been riding hard, and it had shaken him badly. Frank Wylie followed, found a place at the bar and smiled mildly at everyone, as though self-conscious of his heavy belt of cartridges.

Ward sensed the tension first. He laid down his cards and slowly pinched his long, smooth upper lip.

"I suppose it's none of our damn business?" he said.

The cat was out of the bag. Instead of answering directly, Gar asked a question of his own. "When did you last see Curt?"

"Yesterday," the gambler said politely, absently riffling the cards.

"Don't suppose you'd mind giving details."

"Why, no! Curt leased that shed and well of his to the express company for a stage watering place, and he had a little stake with him. He came in for a game, that's all. And for some groceries, and some dress goods for his wife."

"And lost everything, I reckon."

"No," the gambler said. "Matter of fact, he won a little. I think he had fifty-sixty dollars, thereabouts, when he came in. He took Rip Turley, for, say, another twenty."

Gar sighed and exchanged looks with Berea Holt. "And?"

"If you're asking if there was further trouble between Curt and Turley, Garfield, I'm sorry I can't assist you. While he was here there was nothing. It was a fast game. Stud. Rip, you know, never likes to lose, and twice Curt had a small pair, back to back. Small, but big enough to win."

"On whose deal, may I ask?" Garfield Proctor asked.

Ward, he knew, had no enemies, no friends. He was that way with everyone—courteous, deferential, obliging. That was as far as it went. The man had no apparent purpose in life except to win at cards. Yet he was sharp to the point of uncanniness when it came to sensing secret antagonisms among others.

"I mean," Proctor went on, "Curt didn't deal himself those two pairs?"

A shadow flickered across the gambler's features.

"To tell the truth," he said, "I dealt them. If I have been the agency for evil, I should be extremely sorry, Garfield."

Gar knew what he meant. He had long suspected a streak of hidden sentiment in Ward. Now it was exposed. Ward had deliberately dealt Wells those winning pairs back to back. He had wanted Curt to regain a pittance of the pile he had lost at the same table over a period of years. Ripley Turley was Bill's younger brother. Money meant nothing to him. Gar knew how Ward's mind had worked: *if Rip's bound to lose it, let him loose it fast to a man who God knows needs it,* Ward had decided.

"I s'pose Rip had something to bet on from the start?" Gar asked heavily.

Ward said, "the first time he had an ace in the hole, the spade ace. His first up card was the ten of spades, wasn't it, boys?" He got confirmation from the other puzzled, silent players. "That's a lot of black spades. It got him all excited, I reckon, knowing Rip. The second hand—why, I believe he had another ace in the hole, I really do believe he did."

Gar felt like saying, *You know damn well he did!* But he kept his peace, although he was suddenly dizzy at the complex skein of human relationships yet to unravel before they came to the right-and-wrong of the thing that

had happened. And as yet they did not even know what had happened.

He held Ward's glance steadily for a moment, and the gambler coolly met his eyes. There was neither sympathy nor antagonism in them, but Gar had the feeling that Ward had told him all that could be learned here. At least they had the genesis of a motive.

He turned to Berea, Red and Frank. "Let's go, boys."

THEY stomped out and silently mounted their horses. Across the street the sheriff's office was dark. Gar shook his head. The lawman was a brave man and reasonably brainy, but he had never been through a range war and he would lack the touch necessary to avert one now.

"Curt's place, I suppose," Berea said in a low voice.

Gar nodded. "And no hurry. There'll be a moon in a little while, and we want to keep an eye peeled as we go."

Red Magoffin uttered a s h r i l l curse. "What're we going to Curt's place for? You know damn well what you'll find! Mrs. Wells will be sitting there patching pants and waiting for the old man to come home from losing his money. And we're going to find him along the road and have to break the news that he was shot in the back. For God's sake, Gar, let's have something to take the lady when we go there!"

"For instance?" Proctor said harshly.

"Bill Turley's scalp!" Red yelled. "Show the lady that Curt's neighbors take care of things, dammit!"

"Women," Gar murmured, "don't set as much store by such things as you'd imagine. Wait till you're married a spell, bub, and you'll find out that a woman don't give a good damn about revenge."

He took his place at the head of the column, spurring his horse until it was well ahead of Red's. It was a psychological trick that stilled Red's hot answer.

They had reached the edge of town, riding slowly, when they heard footsteps behind them. Gar turned and saw the white *V* of a man's shirt front, and he pulled up his horse until Ward caught up. Ward, the gambler, was winded. Saddles squeaking, the four sat there until he regained his breath.

"I want you to be sure of one thing, Garfield," Ward finally said, "although I think you already know it. I had only the friendliest of motives in whatever I did. The last thing I thought of was creating trouble. I am not a reformed man. I have done this before. Poker sometimes becomes a bore in itself, and when you get jaded playing, you seek to accomplish something with it that is not in Hoyle."

"Play God, for instance," Gar said, "by starting something. Only God can usually finish what He starts."

"That's all hearsay with me," the gambler said wryly. "My point is that if, after Curt left Bundy's, he had trouble with Rip, or if Rip went home and told Bill, and Bill had one of his 'spells' and set out to do something to Curt without consulting Rip—why, I had no idea that train of events would follow."

Berea Holt spoke suddenly. "What doesn't occur to you, hombre, is that if you'd been working at a job all these years you wouldn't have been there to do it last night. Sure you played a square game this time; but if you'd not won all Curt's money over the last five years—"

The gambler smiled in the darkness. "There we go, back to the root of all evil! Let me state the rest of my case this way: Over a period of years, Curt lost probably five thousand dollars to me. If he had not been a poker player, the chances are that big family of his would have eaten up four thousand of that, and the other thousand would have been worn out in the cheap little things a poor man buys—and wears out quickly.

"However, if you find that Curt has been—killed—" The word came to his lips unwillingly—"and if it was done by a Turley, and if you can find any link that indicates that what happened last night was to blame, I will give the Widow Wells ten thousand dollars in gold."

The four men gasped, and Gar said involuntarily, "Well, that's white, that's damn white of you! A man couldn't do more." Then: "But the Turleys have got too much money for us. They'll get a lawyer from Frisco or Sacramento and get him off, and you know that!"

Ward said, "I was not speaking of legal guilt. Legally, I certainly never could be convicted, yet I have what would pass in one of you for a feeling of guilt, a certain sense of responsibility for what happened. I do not care about lawyers, Garfield Proctor! When *you* think I owe that ten thousand in gold, come ask me for it. Good night."

They thought he bowed to them in the uncertain light. Then he turned his back and the white shirt-front vanished and his black coat hid him as he paced back toward Bundy's place.

"Well I'll be everlastingly!" Berea Holt murmured.

"He's sure, too, that Curt is dead," Gar said. "Up to now I had hopes we were on a wildgoose chase, that we were—well—stalking *feelings*—or—or something. But Ward feels it too, and you can't spend a lifetime around a poker table without knowing a lot about human nature that a man shouldn't know. Come on, men."

CHAPTER THREE

Sign of the Little Brown Horse

THE night suddenly turned cold as the wind veered to let in wet ocean air from a storm-current a thousand miles away. But if there was a storm in the sky anywhere, they had no other way of knowing it. The moon shot up suddenly from behind the mountains, bathing the terrain in blue-white light.

They reached the fork in the stage road where the right-hand trail led to Proctor's place; but they kept their horses on the road itself. A little farther on, Proctor cleared his throat.

"I don't know as it would do much good to keep your eye out for Bill and that big rifle of his," he said, "because if he's hangin' around anywhere and gets a bead on you, it wouldn't matter whether you saw him or not. But it wouldn't hurt, boys."

"Lord!" Berea marveled. "I've seen him knock a mountain lion off a rock at four hundred yards, and when we got there we found he had hit it square in the head. Only there wasn't no head left."

"Heavy caliber, eh?" Red said.

"An old Army Springfield .45-70," Berea answered. "He makes his own ammunition and he practic'lly lives with that gun."

He rode on a minute and then exploded, "Bill used to be the pick of that no'count Turley tribe, but somebody whanged him over the head with a stove lid lifter up to Independence and he's been tetched ever since."

"Not no-'count exactly, the Turleys," Gar offered. "They're hard workers, and they know how to make money, and if a man makes it I reckon he's got a right to spend it wild. It's them that ain't got it, like poor puny Curt, that's got no business throwin' it away."

They had crossed the foothills and dropped down into the valley. It was easier riding now, but while they were in the foothills there had been a few trees, a little shadow. Here there was nothing to protect them from Bill Turley, or anyone else who might lurk on the heights. They fell silent and rode with eyes moving watchfully from side to side.

Frank Wylie started to say something, had to stop and clear his throat, and begin all over again. "That's Liscomb Canyon on the other side of the knob there."

By common consent they spread out on either side of the trail, Red and Frank to the left, Gar and Berea to the right. Magoffin's nervous buckskin caught it first, the sound or scent of a horse. He threw up his head and whickered.

"He hears something or smells something!" Red cried. "Hush a minute!"

They pulled up. Magoffin's pony would not be quiet. He cut its neck sharply with the split end of the reins and said, "Sh-h-h, there!" but he had to get down and grip its nostrils to make it be still.

Then they all heard it: the whinny of another horse to their right, in the direction of the mountains.

"Could be anybody's critter," Wylie said. "Could be a rutting mare. Or one of the nesters up there riding home, or mebbe a prospector."

"It could be," Gar said, "but let's go see. Frank, suppose you and Red wait here and keep your eyes and ears open. Berea, let's you and me try to find that cayuse."

They found it, a little old brown horse with the scars of many a forgotten round-up on its hide. Its poorly-cinched saddle had slipped back as the animal scrambled up a height somewhere, and then had turned upside down. It hung forlornly under the brown pot-belly. The bridle was still on, however, the worn, patched reins much soiled and trampled where the horse had walked on them. One of them had fouled in a low-growing evergreen shrub.

"Curt's old pony," Berea said. "I mind when he swapped a Mexican out of it eight years ago. Cripes, I never thought then it would live a year, and so help me if it didn't—"

He had started to say "outlive Curt," but he did not. They took off the saddle and bridle and dropped them beneath a skeletal joshua tree, the most spectacular landmark in the neighborhood. Yet why they did it, for who would ever collect Curt Wells' worn and useless property other than some stray Mexican or Indian, neither knew.

"You foller the horse; he might taken you back there," Berea said. "I'll try to backtrack. I got a leetle better eyes for it than you, Gar."

"More likely he'll head straight for home, or for some grass."

That was what the horse did. He started walking determinedly toward the upper levels, where the hills and canyons were greener and abounded with springs. Gar returned to Berea and found him angling southward toward the stage road. As Gar reached him, Berea got down off his horse.

"It's been easy so fur, but the 'dobe begins about here, and the grass, and I wish I had daylight. Why'nt you whoop to the boys to head on down the stage road? They might blunder into something and save us some time. We know it's this-away anyhow."

Gar shouted, and sat listening while the echoes rocked back and forth across the valley. Red Magoffin answered, and in a moment he and Frank came trotting down the road.

"Hold up there and—" Gar shouted.

Red's yell interrupted him. They were at a distance, and Magoffin's voice was too high

to make out the words, but the older men realized there was no use back-trailing farther. They were old enough to know haste is no good when a man is dead—and rode down to the trail.

RED had tied the buckskin, and the animal was fighting its stout reins, trying to get away. Gar had time to admire the horse and the picture it made, and to take pride in it and its breeding, its youth and fire and agility and stamina. The buckskin was out of old Polly, by that palomino stallion that—

Red was off the road a yard, kneeling in the sparse grass. Frank Wylie was a little farther away, retching noisily.

"Here he is, Gar," Red said quietly.

Proctor and Berea dismounted and knelt alongside the crumpled figure. There was no clue to how he had met death—neither welcome nor terror, regret nor anticipation. The face was a blank.

"Look at that hole in him," Proctor said, "Rifle, probably."

Red leaped to his feet. "Rifle? Probably? Why damn your yellow soul, Gar, you *know* it was a rifle! Look at him! Looks like he was hit in the back with a pole-ax! Who else owns a big gun like that but Bill Turley? Nobody, and you know it! Why, I never even knew *he* had until now. And anybody owns a .45-70, people *know* about it. Why, I bet we could even find the slug here."

Berea laughed. "Shows how much you know about them big rifles, youngster. If that gun was f'ared from where I 'low it was, there was enough force left to that slug after it went through Curt to dig itself a well a hundred yards off. Look at the angle through him! From high in the back to just a leetle lower where it come out his chest. Why, that slug wouldn't hit the ground this side of, for Lord's sake, Bakersfield!"

"What do you want me to do, then?" Red said hotly. "Get a confession? Do you have to see—oh, for—"

"Hold up a minute, Red," Gar interrupted. "No young squirt that works for me is going to sass Berea that-away. I reckon Berea will be there at the showdown."

"If there ever is a showdown!"

"There will be one," Berea sighed. "No, let him alone, Gar. He's got the right ideas and I don't mind a bit when a young feller speaks right up. Man my age may have more sense, but I reckon maybe sense slows a man down at that."

Frank Wylie came over and stood looking down at the dead man. His pallid face was stronger than Gar had ever seen it. He was white, emptied of everything, still sick enough to reel as he stood there, but there was a new vein of iron in him too.

"You know, I never saw anybody sh-shot up that way before, and it taken me sick," he apologized wanly. "Oh my God, I'm goin' to puke again!" He stumbled away and retched.

Gar compressed his lips.

"He'll be all right," Berea said, scratching at his beard with his maimed hand. "Hev you plumb forgot how it is to be young?"

"What'll we do, stand here and gossip all night?" Red said shrilly.

"No," Berea said. "Gar, you go get your wife. Go through the pass yonder and down Liscomb—it won't hurt you this once. And then break the news to Beatrice. While you're to home, send a spring-wagon hellity-larrup here to pick up Curt. Red, you and me and Frank will mosey back into town. Can't pack a man that stiff on a horse."

"That sounds like sense," Red said. "Let's go!"

Gar sighed, "Lord, but I dread Liscomb! I must be gettin' old. Time was I'd a just loved a ride down that canyon at night."

* * *

Mrs. Proctor had only one light burning in the kitchen when he arrived at nine-fifteen, a small kerosene lamp, with a round, flowered pink globe. She heard Gar's big wolf dog bay hoarsely as he recognized his master, and she put down her mending and went to the door.

The rancher, almost spent, turned his horse into the corral and stood for a moment watching it roll the itch and saddle-sweat off its back. Then he dropped his saddle into a heap and strode to the house.

"Was it—"

"It was. Now, Min, don't break down. You've got to go with me and tell Beatrice."

"Oh, Papa, I can't, I can't!" the woman wailed. "And who'll I leave with Betsy?"

"Whitey can wait in here. He can read them trashy magazines as well in here as in the bunkhouse. Hurry and get dressed, woman—and put on an extra petticoat, because it's clammy out tonight. You and me will go back by Liscomb."

He hurried to the bunkhouse and caught a seven-up game in progress.

"Whitey," he said to an aged man of grandfatherly appearance, "you go in the house and ride herd on the baby. Purlie, you and Dave ketch up Punkin and Mopey, and hitch 'em to the big buckboard. Billy, I want you to get out my .30-30 and go up by the hay-shed and sort of keep watch. Wait until after I'm gone, so the dog won't foller me, and then turn him loose.

"And all of you keep your eyes peeled for Bill Turley! There's like to be hell to pay tonight."

"Or any damn' Turley!" old Whitey

squeaked. "Gar, this has been comin' on a long time."

"No it hasn't," Gar argued patiently. "Things like this ain't ordained. Somewhere along the line they could be avoided. However!"

He told Purlie and Dave how to find Curt Wells' body, and ordered them to take it to Henshaw's Furniture Store and Funeral Parlor, in Libertad. There they were to wait, keeping the fast team handy and rested—and no getting drunk, either.

Mrs. Proctor was waiting on the back stoop when he returned with Whitey. She had pulled on a pair of overalls and worn angora chaps, and her mittened hands extended from the sleeves of a heavy mackinaw, holding a bag of gifts she was taking over to "poor Beatrice."

Gar saddled a sturdy bay for himself, and the little pinto mare for his wife. The pinto was getting on in years, but for all Mrs. Proctor had ridden her lately she had not noticeably deteriorated. They mounted and rode out of the yard. Mrs. Proctor looked back, to see Whitey's silhouette against the uncurtained kitchen window.

"I do hope Betsy don't have a nightmare. Although she was sleeping well." A sob caught her throat. "I had the nicest hen-and-dumplings ready for you, Papa. They'll be all soggy now. The boys said they was wonderful."

How like a woman, Gar thought, to fret herself over little things like soggy dumplings when murder marred the range! Yet perhaps the dumplings were a symbol—one of the little, civilized touches of that tractable state of domesticity which now was endangered by a range war. Men, when they started shooting, fretted no more about dumplings than they did about lives. Perhaps the women had the right idea, after all.

"I sure do dread that ride through Liscomb," he murmured. "Guess I'm gettin' old, Mama."

"Pshaw, Gar, *you're* not old!" she replied vigorously.

CHAPTER FOUR

Seeds of Hell

THE man looked enormous as he dismounted under the moon. Somewhere back along the trail—he forgot where—he had been able to cram the big gun into its straps. Now he had a hard time freeing the weapon, and his horse was eager to get to water and would not stand still. He was very gentle with the horse, very patient. At last he got the big gun free. He peeled off the saddle, undid the throat-latch of the bridle, and pulled it from the horse's head. As the animal bounded away, colt-like in its thirst, he gave it an affectionate pat on the rump. He rubbed the sweat off the bridle headstall, cleaned the bit fastidiously, and carried bridle and saddle into the long log barn. There he spent ten minutes cleaning the saddle; every spot that touched the horse received minute and particular care.

When he came out of the barn he saw the big gun still leaning against the corral. He started back and clutched at both sides of the barn door. A smaller man could not have reached both sides.

"No! No!" the big man whimpered. "I—I dreamed it. I wouldn't do a thing like that. No! No! I—I—I just thought I did. I was having a 'spell' and I just thought I did. That's it!"

He picked up the gun, and his steps became stealthy. The long, rambling adobe main house was set in a grove of post oaks, and a squat log bunkhouse sat on the slope below. The man paused a moment in indecision, nibbling his finger-ends and talking to himself. Abruptly he veered to the right, toward the bunkhouse.

He listened at the window. A card game was just breaking up in a mild quarrel over who opened the draft of the heating stove. The bickering took his mind off his own troubles. He waited patiently until it became quiet.

The bunkhouse was divided into four rooms. At one end was the cook's bedroom, occupied now by Su Cha and a visiting relative from Sacramento. Next was the kitchen, then in line but beyond that was the dining room, where the boys had been playing cards. At the far end was the bunkroom, with tier upon tier of bunks.

There was an extra pair of bunks in the dining room, for use during round-up or haying time. The big man slipped inside quietly, pulled off his boots, and crawled into one of the bunks. Instantly, he was asleep.

He did not hear the door open a few moments later. A crochety Mexican vaquero—he who had been accused of opening the draft and making the room too warm—came into the dining room, calling back over his shoulder:

"*Bueno!* If you will freeze me to death, amigos, I weel a-sleep in thee dining room weeth my own fire. I theenk you mus' be those polar bears, no?"

He slammed the door, swore in a startled manner as he beheld the sleeping man. He tip-toed over and raised a corner of the blanket. All he saw was a ruddy forehead, but it was enough. There was a small indentation on the forehead, a scar in the very bone.

The Mexican tip-toed outside and, without notifying anyone else in the bunkhouse, ran to the big house. It was dark. He opened the

oaken front door, which was never kept locked, and stepped into a fine rambling old-fashioned living room. Beyond was a hall. He moved swiftly across the room and went down the hall to one of the five bedroom doors, where he rapped sharply.

"What is it?" a sleepy voice called.

"It's me, Señor Rip—Rafael!"

"Well, what do you want?"

"It's about Señor Bill, if you please. He's come home and sleep in those bonkhouse. He's got those beeg rifle by thee bed, too. I theenk maybe he's been in some trouble maybe, Señor Rip."

Feet hit the floor of the room, and someone dragged a pair of boots out from under the bed.

"All right, Rafael. *Gracias.* Wait out in the front room for me, and don't wake the old man. No use worrying him until we know for sure."

"*Si.* That's what I th'ought, señor."

Rafael returned to the living room and turned his back to the dying bed of coals in the stone fireplace.

It was a huge, lumbering but still graceful young man who came out of the bedroom moments later, buttoning a checked shirt. He came through the living room, told Rafael to remain there, and went down to the bunkhouse. He came back carrying the big rifle. He shook his head somberly at Rafael but said nothing. At the last bedroom door, he knocked.

"It's me, Pa. There's hell to pay. Bill shot Curt Wells in the back and is down in the bunkhouse now."

"In the back? Shot Curt in the back?" came a deep, bass reply.

"Yes, I said in the back!" the son replied irascibly. "Come on, Pa—don't lay there and ask questions and fret. What's done's done, and they'll be comin' after him."

"You shut up and wait a minute. I'll be right out. Marthy! Where's my—oh, here they are, on the rockin' cheer. Holy hell, but this floor's cold! I'm goin' to take to sleepin' in my sox after—*all right,* Rip, I'm comin'. Shut up!"

They met in the living room. Rip explained quickly.

"Curt, the cowardly pup, has been teasin' Bill like he was the village half-wit ever since that fight. You know what he's like. He'd dearly love to have somethin' to tease a Turley about, and since poor Bill's been addled he wouldn't let him alone."

"If you boys had been peaceable citizens, folks wouldn't feel that way about you," the old man protested. He was almost as big as his sons, and looked tougher, like a gnarled old oak that has withstood sixty-five seasons on an exposed mountain-top.

"Peaceable!" Rip exploded. "A Turley don't have to be peaceable! A Turley can whup any three other men you fetch on."

"Yes," said his father, reasonably, "but you're goin' to have a sight more than three buzzin' around like hornets over this. What happened?"

"Bill rode by Curt's place yesterday, and Curt came out and talked him into going all the way down to Three Points to see that widow—you know, Ethel Something-or-other. Curt fooled poor Bill into thinking the widow was in love with him.

"Then today, or yesterday—what time is it, anyway? This afternoon, then, since it's only nine-thirty, I lost a little money playin' poker to Curt and, like a fool, I groused about it to Bill when we rode out of town together. Pa, I didn't have no idear what he was up to, when he took 'tother fork with that big .45-70 of his'n! I swear I didn't—I wasn't *mad* at Curt for winnin'—I was just, you know—put out at my luck."

"And Bill took it serious."

"I reckon he did," Rip groaned. "But, Pa, what's done is done, and Curt brought it on himself, teasin' poor Bill! He ain't responsible."

"In the back, you say?"

"I tell you, he ain't responsible!" Rip said evasively.

"But in the back? A Turley shot a man in the back?"

"He's addle-pated, Pa!" Rip roared. "He didn't know, no more than a kid! And are you goin' to let them take him and string him up because of that?"

"IT WON'T be because of that, Rip," the old man said in a dead voice. "It'll be because you two have been such hellions all your lives. Oh, I grant you work, but so does a good mule! You've never been out of trouble, either of you. You fit with old Gar Proctor, the best friend I ever had until I had to taken up one of your quarrels. You got throwed out of school, the school I gave the land for! I had to buy you out of three different gun-fights I know of, and I had to fin'ly elect us a sheriff of our own so I wouldn't continually have to pay—pay—pay!"

The old man licked his lips and, stony-faced, renewed his rumbled indictment.

"What does the country think of my boys—the country I helped build up? Who cares what happens to you? Now one of you has gone too far; but who's to forgive you, as they'd forgive another man? The name of Turley is *p'izen—p'izen*—in a country I helped build up from the wild! Name of Heaven, how did I ever breed two such whelps, to break my heart and their mother's in our old age?"

Rip's face was gorged with blood, but he knew better than to let his rage get the best of him.

"They'll just hang him, Pa. You know that."

The old man's shoulders slumped and he sighed, "I reckon not."

Rip relaxed and shot a triumphant glance over his father's bowed head at Rafael.

"I didn't think a Turley would let 'em hang a Turley," he said.

"Shut up. Rip, you tell Bill to come to the house and stay with his mother. He'll mind her, and it'll give her something to do to take her mind off her troubles. Then run over to the Savages and tell Leland he's needed—they're friends. And stir up Ollie Lecompte. They're not friends, but they're kin."

"Yes, Pa."

"Rafael, you turn out the boys and tell them to get dressed. I'll be down in a minute. And by the way, Rafael—from now on, you're foreman here."

"Eh?"

It came from Rip, a startled explosion of breath. The old man shook his gray head grimly.

"That's right. From now on you're takin' orders from Rafael. Son or no son, you're just a hand. Man can't rule himself, can't

Never mind his yacht... how's his
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rule others. I should a took that step long ago. You heered me! Ride!"

Rip, stunned, went out of the house as though sleep-walking. The diplomatic Rafael, knowing Rip's temper, seemed inclined to linger and reject his new promotion. But, stooping over, he peered into the older Turley's face and saw something that prohibited such an act. He shrugged a Latin shrug.

"Si, Señor Vince." He went out quietly.

The old man met his "addled" son as he stumped bleakly down to the bunkhouse. Bill did not look addled now. His face was a mirror of misery and he could not look his father in the eye. Old Vince Turley clapped a knotty hand on Bill's shoulder, gripped it briefly, and stalked on down to the bunkhouse. Bill's feet dragged more than ever as he continued on to the house.

"Men," Turley said, as he paused in the bunkhouse door, "I 'low Rafael and Rip have told you what's up. It ain't your fight, 'less you want to make it that. And I tell you, it'll be a fight! I won't hold it against any man who wants to ride out now, and he can take one of my horses if he hasn't got one to ride. You'll not be harmed if you do. My neighbors are reasonable, and they will not count you as a Turley if you make yourself scarce."

There was a moment of silence. Rafael, his dark eyes glittering with excitement, was already buckling on a pair of gold-mounted guns, his pride and joy. He had a match between his teeth, but it did not prevent him from humming a catchy little Mexican tune. The others looked from one to another, and Vince Turley knew they were thinking: *All right for Rafael—he gets Rip's job.*

First to speak was a smallish man with a darkly-tanned face, bright blue eyes and a close-clipped, brindle mustache. He was sitting on the edge of his bed buttoning his shirt. He had not yet drawn on his pants, and from his waist down he was all flannel underwear. He had been the last man hired, less than two weeks ago.

"Why, boss," he said, "in the time I been here, I never thought to see the day I'd want to be thought a Turley, but as the feller says, anything can happen. I don't know these reasonable neighbors of yours, but from what I heard of them I don't cotton to them—not one bit! If there's to be a fight, I'm your man!"

"I take it you like to fight, then," Vince Turley said.

"I never said I hated it, did I?"

The old man shook his head somberly. "There! That's what makes trouble like this. This fight is nothing to you, and yet—oh well! But I ort to make you all ride off."

"You could tie me on my horse, I guess, and hit it a good lick."

The old man threw up his hands. The rest of the crew had caught the spirit. They were grinning wickedly, and they sped their dressing. He went out, and the moment his back was turned they began jabbering in excitement, all but the first who had spoken. Vince did not hear his voice.

Rafael came out, spat out his match, and patted his revolvers.

"That new feller, what's his name?" Old man Turley asked.

"He says jus' call heem Tip."

"Gunman, ain't he?"

The Mexican nodded. "I theenk so. Veree good, I bet, too. How you theenk that for luck, to have heem here now?"

Turley did not answer. Luck? No, it was just one more piece in an ominous pattern two decades old. This thing had been building . . . building . . . building for years. An item here, an event there, a hatred here, a hot word some other place. Now a quarrel, now a secret, smoldering antagonism that never quite built up to a quarrel. And there was no fixing the place in time when a man could say, "This is where it started."

But here it was! He would fight—and he did not want to fight—for a son. And the son was in the wrong. And, from this moment on, it would be war to the death with his neighbors. And he liked his neighbors!

"Did I do everything wrong, the way I raised them boys?" he groaned to himself. "Yet who raised Curt Wells wrong, and made him the snivelin' coward that would not dare lift a hand to Bill when he had his wits, but who would abuse a fine wife and neglect a fine family, and tease a pore feller when he's gone off his nut?

"Who *is* to blame?"

CHAPTER FIVE

Tinhorn Philosopher

ODDLY enough, the trip back to the valley stage road by Liscomb Canyon was not as agonizing as Gar Proctor had feared. In fact, he felt fresher when he arrived at the seedy, shabby little Wells place than when he set out. He and Min had talked of everything but the murder and the trouble to come. His mind was clearer, cooler. In a sense, he was now able to stand off and coolly survey the problem.

He was surprised to see how pretty and young-looking Beatrice Wells was, for all she was the mother of a big family. How old was she, anyway? Say thirty-two or three.

"But she alwavs had more git-up-and-go than Curt," he mused. "Beatrice ain't the kind to die on the vine like a late-budding gourd."

A sudden thought struck him. Was she the reason Red Magoffin was so indignant over

this affair? Not that he suspected for a moment that there was anything "between" them. But probably Red had been attracted to her and had sympathized with her without knowing it himself. Red, Garfield Proctor knew, had a cast-iron, bull-headedly honorable personal code. He would not look twice at another man's wife, no matter how impatient he became with the shortcomings of the man.

But suppose the man was dead? Would not that same honor in Red then rise to the surface as a protective instinct? Beatrice was seven or eight years older than Magoffin and had a ready-made family; but Red had been "queer" lately, unhappy with his work, and maybe he was feeling that craving to settle down and breed a family.

"By the Lord Harry, it would be grand!" Proctor said to himself. "She'd make him a good wife and he'd make something of this run-down place. Have to take a second look at that boy. That is," he added with a wry, mirthless smile, "if he don't get himself killed."

He stayed outside with the horses, brooding, and sucking cigarette after cigarette, while Min was inside with the widow. Mrs. Wells must have taken it well—but then she had strength, that one! It was Min's voice he heard wailing, and it was Beatrice who came to the door, shapely and supple and patient-looking, to thank him.

"No one could be more neighborly, Gar," she said in a dull voice. "Now I only hope there won't be more trouble made. Can you see to that?"

"Try, maybe," he said cautiously.

"Do! Curt was—well, easy-going, and that's all! There wasn't a bit of malice in him, and now that it's come to this, he wouldn't want it to go any further. Please, Gar, make them forget it . . . somehow."

"I'll try."

She passed her hand across her forehead and went back into the house. She was using her last reserves of strength. If he stayed around—if she and Min knew there was a man handy to cry to—both would likely break down. That was the devil of it with women! With him gone they'd find the strength to brace each other through the long night.

He turned Min's horse into the corral and rode off, keeping to the grass so they would not hear the beat of his horse's hoofs.

The moon was straight overhead now, and until morning it would be waning. He had no idea what time it was, but it must be close to midnight. Bad business, that it had taken him so long!

Reaching the stage road, he spurred his horse. He was surprised to meet no one until he rode into Libertad. The country should have been afoot. Libertad was dark, but a cigarette glowed in front of Bundy's place. It was the gambler, Ward, who stood there.

The man stepped out from under the porch roof into the moonlight. He pitched his cigarette away and stepped on it carefully, grinding it with a spinning back-and-forth motion of his heel.

"Hear those coyotes!" he murmured. "The sound certainly carries tonight, doesn't it?"

"It's just that you're listenin'," Gar said.

Ward smiled. "That may be."

"Where are they?"

"Sheriff's been sent for, but it'll be another case of late again-sorry," Ward said. "Everyone else has ridden off in the direction of the Turley place, in something of a temper, I might add. Curt Wells—rather, his remains—were deposited somewhat hastily in the furniture store. He and I appear to be the community's sole defenders. Sad state of affairs, I'd say."

The man's voice was bitterly self-deprecatory. Gar shook off the momentary twinge of pity for him. "How long they been gone? For Lord's sake, tell me about it! Did they straggle off, or did they make up a posse?"

"Leland Savage rode in and said that he was a friend of the Turleys and he didn't see any sense in trouble and why didn't they wait and let the sheriff handle it. Said he'd guarantee that Bill Turley was turned over to the sheriff to stand trial. Said further that he'd guarantee that old Vince Turley would send Bill up to 'Frisco for a skull operation or have him put away somewhere if the law did not convict him."

"And?"

"The boys listened, but they would have no truck with Lee as a peacemaker. Insisted upon having things their own way. Incidentally, it was that young red-headed rider of yours who upset the applecart when Lee almost had them talked into it."

"He would!"

Ward raised his eyebrow. "But he was also the one who insisted that Lee be given a half hour start, 'to get back to his own friends,' as he said."

"He'd do that, too!"

"Yes. All he needs is a new set of brains and he'd be a sterling citizen," Ward murmured. "But he'll learn, as you and I have—if he lives as long as you and I."

He abruptly hitched up his trousers. "I suppose you're riding after them? I'll go along."

"You'd better stay here."

"I'll go along," the gambler said firmly.

"What about that ten thousand in gold? Somebody's liable to get hurt tonight, and that white shirt-front of yours is a nice target. You'd best pay your pledges before you go riding off."

"Wait until I get my horse. The gold," Ward said, with an unexpected chuckle, "is in the care of the barkeep at Bundy's. If anyone plugs my nice clean shirt tonight, you just drop in tomorrow and ask for it!"

Ward rode well despite the fact that he was seldom on a horse. Yet he kept one of the best and showiest ponies in the country, a black stallion with white points, eagerly sought at stud by ranchers. The brute was untrained as a cattle horse and it took a strong corral to hold him. Ward rode him with a severe Spanish bit, but he rode him!

"Terrible waste of energy, this," he observed, when he had the big stallion under control. "Should be a much more economical way of straightening out situations like this, than taking men out of beds all over the range and setting them to shooting at one another."

"It's a bad business," Gar agreed.

"That's the advantage of having the Law, you know. With the Law firmly planted, with people used to it and to obeying it, a single officer can be hired to do what we're doing tonight, much more efficiently. Posses are a sign of primitive civilization."

"So are tinhorn gamblers," Gar said curtly. "When we get the kind of a country you describe, you'll be long gone from it. Gamblers just don't flourish in the kind of a country—well, the kind of a country that women look forward to."

"That's true," Ward agreed. "Men like myself do well in a raw country. Then the Law comes and we have to skeddadle—as you people say—until a time when the country fills up too much and becomes too civilized. Then we come back! You know, there are more useless people in cities than anywhere else. Funny, isn't it?"

"I'm laughin' my head off," Proctor said.

THE last lamp was blown out at eleven-fifty.

"I don't like this!" old Vince Turley fretted. "They're up to no good. Lee, I wish you hadn't took so much onto yourself, speakin' for the Turleys! Nobody speaks for the Turleys but a Turley. You should of let nature take its course, dammit."

They were sitting in the big living room—sixteen men who may not all have been close to the Turleys, but who for one reason or another counted themselves more for than against them. They were ranchers, landowners or leaseholders and the owners of herds. Another fifteen men—hired riders of the Turleys or their allies—were sitting in a row in the rear of the dark bunkhouse.

Leland Savage squirmed in his chair. "Well, Vince, I still think it was worthwhile. If a man hasn't got the right to speak he's got no business to shoot."

Rip Turley, in the corner, swore under his breath. He had his brother's big gun between his knees, his hands clenched around the barrel. Rip had been drinking. He licked his lips continuously and the lines of his heavy face were slack.

"Mebbe you're right, Lee," Vince agreed. He threw Rip an angry glance. "Oh, shore! *You* wouldn't think so. Hell of a prop you are in a man's old age. Drink and cause trouble, that's all you think of. Where's your brother?"

"In with Ma," Rip said sullenly.

"Is he hard to handle tonight?" Ollie Lecompte asked.

"No," Vince said. "As a matter of fact, he claims he don't remember to of shot Curt. All he knows is he had the hot gun in his hand. Anyway his ma can handle him. He minds her like a baby. That's more'n I can say about my other boy."

"Don't you ride me, Pa," Rip rumbled. "Don't ask for trouble in front of people. I got some rights here."

"You got the rights of a second-rate hired hand," the father said flatly. "Everything we got, I accumulated. Everything that's been wasted, you and Bill wasted. You've never keered to act the part of a son, so don't you start nothing with me. I begot you, and it's too late to do anything about that. But I hired you, and I can fire you, and let's see how—"

A yell came from outside, followed by the clump of heels on the porch. Rafael stuck his head in the door.

"I theenk we have got thee, what-you-call, companee," he said, with a smile.

They looked from one to the other. Vince stumped outside. The hands in the shadow of the bunkhouse had scattered fast about the moonlit yard. Only the sandy gunman, Tip, seemed cool. He was leaning against the bunkhouse wall paring a thumbnail when every other man had his gun out or half out.

"What's up?" Vince asked him.

Tip gestured toward Rafael. "He's the foreman, mister. I never go over the head of the nearest boss to me. I just work here."

"All right. Then go tell them two Chinese to shut up gabblin' and boil up some coffee and warm up some grub."

"Done been done," Tip drawled, "Rafael seen to it. You got a good man in Rafael, mister."

"Don't mister me!" Vince turned to the Mexican foreman. "Well?"

"Only that we heard someone coming, crossing Bee Creek. You know how it rings when horses step on the stones, señor."

The others had come piling out on the porch behind Vince. He turned to them. "Ollie, you take your boys and go down below, in case they try to circle around." Vince was speaking swiftly. "Lee, I wish you'd go

up around the hay sheds with your boys. Turn those calves out. They're some of Gar Proctor's pureblood stock and I don't want them plugged by accident.

"Rafael, you stay here with Rip and me. Tip, I want you here too. The rest of you boys take cover. The main thing I want everybody to remember is: *nobody-gets near the house!* I don't want any shooting around here."

A halloo sounded from the main trail.

"Lee, send your boys to the haysheds. You go see who it is," Vince said.

He watched Lee mount his horse and ride away. In a moment he came back with three horsemen. One was Berea Holt, whom old Vince knew well. He had seen the other two around, knew them to be Proctor's men.

"Vince, you know me," Berea said, without apology or introduction, reining up before the porch. "This is Red Magoffin and this is Frank Wylie. I reckon you know what we want."

"And you're not going to get it."

Berea sighed. "Well, Vince, no harm in askin', I reckon." Then he burst out, "Law me, but I hate to see this start!"

"Then why start it?"

"You know as well as I do that it don't hev to *be* started, it will start itself. I wish you'd be reasonable, Vince."

"I'm waitin' for the sheriff, Berea. When he comes, he can have whatever he wants, legal and proper."

A growl of protest sounded from Rip, behind Vince. There was no one else visible now. Just Vince and Rip on the porch, Leland Savage chewing at a twig as he sat on his horse, waiting to escort the three back. But that Berea, Red and Frank knew they were covered was obvious.

It was Red who gave way first. "And you can keep on waitin' for the sheriff, Turley," he snarled. "He's your cur, body and what soul he's got. And this time the Turleys can't beg off through the Turley law."

"Cowboy, it's all the law there is," Vince said, unexpected apology in his tone. "Ain't the best in the West, but what Lee told you this evening still goes."

Again that unintelligible snarl from Rip. Red reacted to it violently. His nervous buckskin danced as Red leaned back on the reins.

"Come on, let's get the boys and clean out this rat's nest!" he cried.

Berea gave Vince a bitterly amused look and half turned his own horse.

"Fine hoss, that buckskin," Vince grated. "Old Gar's a nut on blood lines, but it's beginnin' to pay off. Hundred dollar horse and a ten-cent rider!"

"Red's a good boy," Berea said. "Well, let's go back and talk it over."

Savage accompanied them as far as the edge of the post-oak grove, where he turned back. The three kept on. No one spoke as Savage pulled up his horse and pivoted. He rode back at a walk. Vince was still standing on the porch, cuddling his big gun in his hand and shaking his grizzled head. Rip was nowhere to be seen.

"Nice night," Lee said with a sigh, looking up at the declining moon. "This is the kind of a night I hate to be in a house. The old woman never can understand why a man would ruther be sleepin' out in a blanket, nights like this, than in his bed."

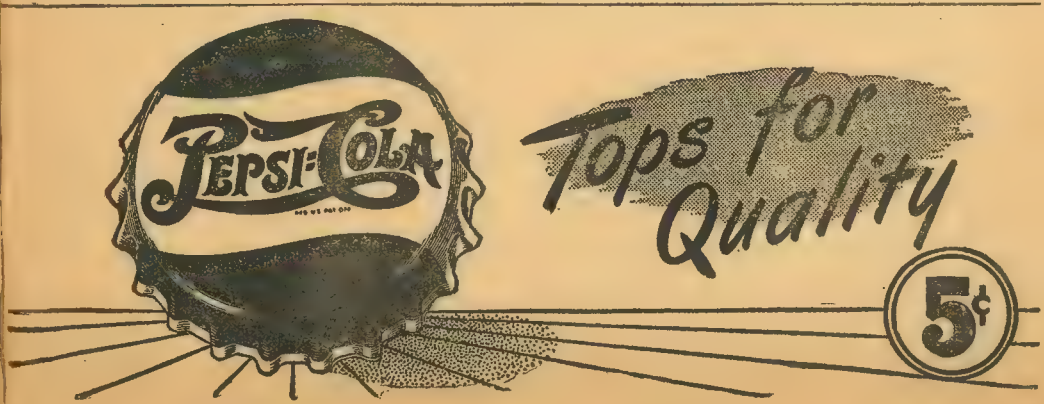
"That red-head," Vince murmured in a low voice, "reminds me of myself at his age. I never had no brains either, and I tried to make up for it in 'prod.' Well, I hope he's lucky."

"Red-heads usually ain't," said Lee. "My, it's a nice night out!"

CHAPTER SIX

Fire!

THE first shot came from the big hayshed—the one with the upper loft and the huge drop-door. One of Leland Savage's boys had



thoughtfully climbed up into the very peak of the roof, suspending himself in the dark inside the shed by a sling attached to the hayfork rail. He had seen something creeping toward the house in the edge of the grove, and had fired at it.

A scream was his reward. Guns blazed back at him and slugs smashed against the moonlit wall of the barn from roof-line to mudsill. They were .45s, but at this range they barely penetrated the solid inch siding.

Down in the grove, Berea Holt knelt over the man who had taken a slug across his ribs. It had struck him high and skated from rib to rib.

"Curious wound," Berea said. "Good thing you were stoopin'. You'll have a peachy scar but you'll be ridin' again tomorrow."

He flattened to the ground as another slug slobbed against the tree next to him. Then came the *boom* of the gun—and then another *boom,* for a bullet that had gone wide and out of his hearing. Berea parted the brush with his crippled hand and peered at the hayshed.

"We're just not goin' to get to the house till that's cleaned out. Now why did he stop shootin'? Oh, I savvy! He knows he can't do no good with a .45. He'll be hangin' up there now and waitin' while they pass him up a rifle. Reckon we better take steps."

He raised himself slightly and called out in a low voice to a man on his right.

"You with the .30-30! See up there in the hole around where the hayfork rail goes in? That's where he's firin' from. You don't have to hit the hole. Just close to it."

The man got to his knee and leveled the rifle. He nursed it a moment before squeezing the trigger. A stream of pain came from the haybarn.

Berea chuckled. "Not bad. Learn them not to try that again." He stood up and shouted, "Red, get around 'tother side of them little haysheds quick, 'fore they get over bein' spooked."

"I see you and raise you!" Red called back. "Come on, Frank, on foot. And watch out—there's a bobwire fence somewhere that will cut your throat."

In a moment the two reached the fence. It squealed as they crawled through it, a warning sound that brought a yell from the hayshed and an answering shout from the big 'dobe house. A slug screamed over them; the sound of its passing made them flinch.

"The big gun," Wylie said. Red saw that the almost chinless cowboy's face was set hard; he remembered what that gun had done to Curt Wells. "Like to wham that barrel over a big rock, when this is over."

They reached the end of the oak grove where the trees had been cut off to make room for the ever greater crops of hay old Vince Turley harvested. Ahead were two stackbutts, where the hay had been moved away months ago. The butts provided no cover at all. The first protection was a big cubical pile of baled alfalfa, but there were two hundred yards of open stumpland between them and it.

Red bit his lips. "Frank, you slip back to the fence and yell for Berea to open up with everything he can, to draw their fire. Don't try to get through the fence and risk warnin' them again with that squeak, though. I'll wait here. When you get back, what you say we make a run for it?"

"Listens good," Wylie said. "Keep your eyes peeled." He disappeared.

Red stretched out full-length and waited. Once a Turley rider came around one of the small haysheds. Red took aim, then held his fire, hoping the man would retreat. He did not want to give away his position.

Then, in response to Frank Wylie's urging, Berea and a half-dozen others opened up a steady *rat-tat-tat* of fire back in the post-oak grove, and the man hastily ducked back out of sight.

Red felt Wylie come up beside him. He looked up and grinned. "Can you run?"

"I'm a runnin' fool," Wylie grinned back.

THEY broke into the open, running hard and crouching low, and were half way to the baled hay when a yell and a shot from the big hayshed warned them they had been seen. Then a fusillade sounded, and Berea and his men stepped up their own fire.

Wylie went down.

Red had reached the shelter of the hay. He threw himself down, panting, and looked around with his mouth open, all ready to josh Wylie about their narrow escape. And Wylie was not there. The chinless cowboy, the fellow who had retched and vomited his shock and pity over what happened to Curt Wells, now himself lay with blood seeping from his body. Red did not dare expose himself further, but from where he lay he could see that two slugs had hit his partner—one in the head, another in the chest, high.

"Why, damn their souls!" Magoffin gasped. "Frank's dead! Why—why—!"

Rage struck him so violently he choked on his saliva. For a moment he was not a thinking man, but a raging, frothing animal. The thing that brought him to his senses was a single, well-directed shot. In his fury he had lunged out of the protection of the baled hay, gun blazing. The shot struck his leg and knocked him down.

His rage left as pain flooded him. He began to think again. He stripped off his pants and gingerly touched the wound—his first bullet-hole! The slug had gone all the way through the flesh. He plugged both the entrance and

exit holes with strips torn from his undershirt. It hurt, but . . . .

Firing had begun far beyond the stand of buildings, down where Berea had sent another force around by the rear. They had run into Ollie Lecompte's men and trouble. For a moment, weakness and nausea left Magoffin unaware of what was going on. The first thing he clearly knew, after a moment, was that someone was warning someone else not to shoot toward the creek.

"There's horses there, you damned cowards!" the man said clearly.

"Then there'd better not be anything but horses," came an answering voice, "because we're comin' through!"

Magoffin's head was clearer. With the clotting of the blood behind the two cloth plugs, dull, burning pain mounted through his leg. And they were counting on him to take care of the men in the haysheds.

He could not stand up, but he was able to pull himself along on his belly to the edge of his protection. His eyes narrowed. He might be in a bad spot himself, but so were those in the haysheds!

"They thought they got both of us," he grinned, leveling his .45. "Joke's on you, amigos."

One man was standing in plain sight, firing through a knothole toward the oak grove. Of the other man, Red could see only an elbow. The elbow could be withdrawn more quickly than the whole man; so he shot the elbow first. The man at the knothole, his nerves on edge, leaped backward and fired twice into the stack of baled hay before Red got him.

"In the stomach, I think," Magoffin said to himself. "If I only had my feet under me! Berea would have a fit if he knowed what a fool I made of myself, getting shot! He's countin' on us bein' well and whole, both of us. In a minute he'll sashay out—"

Berea himself emerged first, and all along the line of trees men stepped out, running hard, holding their fire until close enough to make it count. The man with the .30-30 remained behind, pumping his gun methodically, covering the advance of the fifteen who trickled out into the waning moonlight.

One of the advancing line fell. Red saw the man who had shot him. He sent a bullet into one of the small haysheds, knowing he had missed but knowing also that the man would not return to that position. He reloaded quickly, and as Berea's men reached an open, treeless corral below him, nearer the big main house than the haysheds, Red raised himself painfully to his elbow.

"He's pulled a fast one, the old fox!" he thought. "Made like he was after the haysheds but he's goin' straight in after Bill Turley!"

Lee Savage shouted an order from the big hayshed, and his own men—now reduced in number to six—streamed out of the sheds. They fired as they ran, trying to stop Berea, trying to force him to turn and meet their fire, instead of advancing toward the house. One or two of Berea's force did stop. They whirled, dropped to their knees, shot back accurately.

Magoffin began shooting at what he thought was the right moment, when Lee's men would have forgotten all about their rear. Caught in the crossfire, they wavered and broke for cover, most of them running for the bunkhouse. Lee himself took two steps toward the bunkhuose and fell on his face. He reached for his lost gun ten feet away.

"Don't do it, Lee!" Red yelled. "You ain't hurt bad. Don't ask for more. Get your hands up and you won't be hurt."

Lee had been hit in the right side, low-down and painful but not necessarily fatal. He raised his hands one at a time, holding his wound with one while the other was in the air.

"Lay down and take care of your wound," Red called.

Berea's men reached the hitchrail, not fifty feet from the long, shadowed porch.

"Better call it off, Vince!" Berea called.

The old man appeared on the porch, his hands in the air. "All right, men," he said. "We quit. Come on in. Almighty God, I had forgot what hell a fight like this could be. Berea, I never meant—I never had no idee—"

His hands fell to his sides, and shame and regret were in every line of his tired, broken, aged body. He took a step down from the porch, the moon shining on his thatch of white hair, and Berea took a step toward him, holstering his gun.

"Vince, I swear I hate—"

The front door slammed and a towering figure appeared in the shadows of the porch roof. Berea broke off in mid-sentence and reached for his gun again.

"Rip! Rip, damn your soul, put down that gun!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Only Boothill Wins

IT WAS old Vince yelling, but the son paid no attention. He was just drunk enough to dare everything and not drunk enough for it to affect his aim. He had Bill's big .45-70 rifle cuddled under his arm, his right forefinger on the trigger, his left, which held two thick cartridges, caressing the bolt.

"Back up!" he said thickly. "Back up, Berea. Nobody's going to take a step in this house."

Berea stepped backward, lifted his hands without being told. "*You* shot Curt!" he cried suddenly. "It wasn't Bill, but you! You made

your poor, half-witted brother take the blame for it."

Vince Turley straightened as though someone had kicked him. He looked up into the shadows of the porch.

"Why, that's true!" he shouted. "You lied! You left Bill out on the trail and rode up and did it yourself. Rip, *put down that gun!*"

The old man took the one step back to the porch. Rip swung the gun. The barrel hit the father on the side of the head, and he crumpled. Berea had started forward, whimpering and swearing as the gun swung; but it came back unwaveringly and halted him.

"Rip," Berea said, reasonably, "you're not going to get by with this."

Rip laughed.

Berea did not turn as he heard someone call his name up in the post-oak grove. Neither did Rip take his eyes off the men in front of him. Two horsemen came out of the shadows. They emerged slowly.

"Gar, stay where you are!" Berea shouted.

Gar reached for his gun. The line of men with Berea broke and ran for it as Rip fired, and then Savage's crew began shooting again from the bunkhouse. The yard, for a moment, was a single knot of milling, shooting, shouting men as the gang in the bunkhouse unexpectedly broke out of the door.

Rip's slug struck Proctor's horse. It went rolling over its own head, throwing Proctor hard. He lit flat on his back and lay still.

Rip thumbed the bolt, and his big left palm slid another cartridge into the chamber as the empty ejected. The bolt slid shut.

Then it was that the second man dropped from his horse and walked up to the porch. The big gun swiveled to the second man.

"Hello, Rip," Ward, the gambler's, quiet voice came.

"I give you one chance," Rip said thickly.

Ward put his hands on his hips. His body jerked a little, as though he had chuckled, but no sound came. Contemptuously, he looked around. The firing had ceased in the open yard. Red Magoffin had covered the retreat of Berea and his men to the haysheds. They were under cover there now, and Savage's men had picked up their wounded boss and carried him back to the bunkhouse. It was quiet, deathly quiet.

"One chance, Rip?" Ward said, taking his time. "The same chance you gave Curt Wells? You see, in my business we learn to put two and two together. The answer, Rip, is four. I admit I was a little slow-witted in getting my four this time. Berea saw it first. Yes, you gave yourself away to Berea! But I should have known.

"You blamed Curt Wells for palming cards didn't you? You big, stupid ox—you thought *he* cheated you. And because you couldn't prove it you didn't dare call him.

"But no one can best a Turley and get away with it, can they? So you shot him in the back and you thought you could blame it on your crazy brother. But, Rip, what ails Bill can be fixed by a doctor. But what ails you can never be fixed! Rip, you're the crazy Turley—and I cheated you."

Ward fired first. His slender white fingers flicked almost casually into his white shirt-front and came out with a little blue-steel .38 revolver. He snapped two shots at Rip, one in the chest and one in the face. Then, as Rip toppled forward, he fired.

The slug struck Ward high in the left shoulder, half tearing his arm off. The gambler was thrown backward by the impact. He never opened his eyes again, and he did not know when Berea Holt looked down at him.

The old man scratched at his whiskers with his injured hand. Vince Turley stumbled to his feet and came weaving down the steps.

Berea spat.

"Family honor!" he snarled. "I could have told you a thing or two, if I'd had the power to remember how bad these things are. I've got a brother, Vince, that's caused me more trouble than your boys put together. Honor! Why look at old Gar Proctor! He's got a brother, too, that cuts notches in his gun and dasn't ride back to Arizona ever again."

"If we had any brains," Vince said, in a steady voice, "we'd be seeing to them as is hurt, Berea. To hell with honor! You try to find that red-head that 'minds me so much of myself, whilst I go pitch a bucket of water on Gar. And somebody stir up that Chinee, and get some grub out. And somebody else go up in the hayshed and see who that was that got the bright idee of shootin' from up high. I think I know who, but I want to make sure."

He was right. It was Tip. The gunman—the one man in Turley's crew who could know the real depths of the trouble that was coming—had been the first to die.

* * *

Toward morning, just as the sky was getting gray, little Betsy Proctor awakened and called out for a glass of water. Old Whitey got up, yawning, and took it in to her. She drank.

"Now you go back to sleep," Whitey told her. "Your ma and pa had to go out, but they'll be back soon. One of the boys just rode by to say that your pa's on his way to get your ma and bring her home. Everything's going to be all right, honey."

The little girl went back to sleep.

THE END

TIN BADGE—IRON MAN!

By KENNETH FOWLER

Tom Garrison's right hand was up, leveling a .45 Colt.

Marshal Tom Garrison could have everything any man desired—in exchange for his life-long, iron-hard code, which made him the man he was!

TOM GARRISON sat on the edge of the bed and watched the afternoon sunlight filter between the slats of the blinds and lay its random pattern on the bare floor. He sat there, abstractedly studying its gilded fretwork, and knew this battle which he had been fighting within himself was a hopeless battle, which could be resolved in only one way.

That pattern, he thought, *is a thing of chance, laid down without plan or reason. It is an accident, just as the pattern of a man's life is an accident.*

And then he thought: *I cannot change what is coming. A man's life falls into a pattern, too, and he cannot alter it any more than the sun can alter the design wrought by that blind.*

His glance moved reluctantly to the foot of the bed, where he had tossed the long, flat package the desk clerk had brought up. He knew, without opening it, what he would find inside.

He rose heavily from the bed, a tall, loose-jointed man with gray, penetrating eyes and a wide mouth tending towards stubbornness. He opened his jackknife and slit the cord that

bound the parcel. On top of the dove-gray cloth lay a square white envelope. It seemed as if Ann Bretherton's warm presence was in the room as he touched it and a faint lavender scent rose to him; a dull ache hit him in the pit of the stomach as he tore open the envelope and read the delicate, slanted script:

> It is no use, Tom. I cannot accept this. You know why. And it so easily might have been the other way.

Except for a slight bunching of the muscles at the corners of his mouth, Tom Garrison's face was expressionless as he raked a match across his black whipcord breeches and held the flame up to the paper. He waited until all of it but the white fragment pinched between his fingers was crisp char; then he let it drop, and ground it slowly under his boot heel. . . .

He had gotten the first word of it yesterday, from Bodie Tainter and Sol Tetherow. They had found him on Main Street, making his usual morning patrol, and had halted him, Tetherow's eyes, behind their steel-rimmed spectacles, showing a frank and grave concern, Tainter's expression that of a man anxious to be the first to drop exciting news.

"Ed Bretherton's back in town," Tainter had blurted, as though afraid Tetherow might beat him to the draw and get in first shot with the announcement. "Will Blackmon saw him less than an hour ago, over at the Totem Pole."

The news had hit Tom Garrison hard, and he had made no effort to conceal it. "Bretherton—in Tribes Hill? Blackmon's sure it was him?"

Sol Tetherow said, "Blackmon knew him in Abilene. He says it's Bretherton all right, Tom."

Tom Garrison said, "I heard he'd been killed there. Too bad, if he wasn't," and turned to go on.

Bodie Tainter's sly voice checked him. "Gonna run him out, Tom? Or you kind of gonna shut one eye this time?"

Garrison was irked by the question, but he had no desire to give the gossiping Tainter any hint of his feelings. "I told him not to come back here," he answered over his shoulder in a curt voice. "I guess that's all I need to say."

Sol Tetherow called on to him, "Be seein' you at the store, Tom," and Garrison gave a nod to that, and went on.

Now, aware that the whole town would be asking the same question Tainter had asked, he walked slowly to the small deal lamp table beside the window and picked up his heavy leather gun-belt. The dark walnut butt of the .45 Colt sagging from it was worn smooth and shiny from many handlings; and as he buckled the belt about his lean middle it seemed to fall naturally into place there, as if by some instant and somber affinity.

His gray eyes had a fixed and brooding expression as he stared down through a crack in the blind at the dusty, wagon-rutted street below him. Tribes Hill was no different, essentially, from those other raw, gun-roaring Frontier towns where he had served as marshal: Latigo, Pay Dirt, Beauregard, Tannerstown, Custer Junction. . . .

Odd, he thought, how a man never really seemed aware of the preciousness of time until he was forty or past. Then, one day, the awareness would hit him like a blow, and he would awaken to its swift and implacable passage with a kind of startled wonderment.

WHEN he had been thirty-eight he had had his first sharp realization of this; now, at forty, it was a thought constantly in his mind, tinged with a fear that had become a firm and ever-widening wedge in his consciousness. Life could so easily pass a man by, almost without his realizing it. Oh, a man could drift with the tide, isolated and drawn into himself. But there was a normal, natural way of life, and an abnormal, unnatural way. And he had striven for the first . . . and failed to find it.

He stared, unseeingly, down into the street. He had been twenty-five when he had fallen in love with Mary McLeod, in Custer Junction. And he could not think of her, even now, without a faint twinge of nostalgia. Fifteen years had dimmed the image of her he still carried in his heart; fifteen years had healed the hurt there, but the sharp need that had succeeded it had remained unfulfilled until a year ago, here in Tribes Hill, when he had met Ann Bretherton.

At twenty-five a man is still young, still very sure of himself. He had not really believed Mary when she had told him, "If you want me, Tom, you will have to take off that marshal's badge. Every time you walked down Main Street, I would be afraid. I couldn't stand it, Tom. . . ."

He had laughed at her fears, so sure of himself, so sure of her. And he had kept the star he had worn so confidently and proudly. But he had not kept Mary McLeod. . . .

He had drifted on, soon after that, and gradually the excitement of bringing law to one tough trail-end town after another had become a kind of opiate, dulling the pain that came with each thought of Mary. To the people who knew him, or thought they did, he seemed a contented enough man, though possibly a little aloof and taciturn; alone, in the dingy hotel rooms he called home, he faced the fact of his bitter loneliness.

His thoughts shifted suddenly back to Ann Bretherton. He had met her just a short time after he had taken the job of marshal, here in Tribes Hill. A pair of drunken cowpunchers had broken into her Bon Ton Millinery at Fourth and Main, and he had run the men down and recovered her money.

He had been a man who had lived only for his day's work, until he had met Ann; but as their friendship ripened, slowly but deeply, the future had seemed to open brightly before him, glowing with the promise of all the truly important things the wasted years of his back-trail had denied him.

It had been an impulse—or perhaps a fear of delaying longer—that had prompted his purchase of the dove-gray cloth at Sol Tetherow's Mercantile. He had been in Sol's, passing the time of day with the bespectacled little storekeeper, when Ann Bretherton had dropped in to buy a spool of thread.

"So!" Ann had given him her slow, grave smile, and only the depths of her hazy blue eyes had shown a tiny flicker of amusement. "So this is how you patrol our town, Mr. Marshal!"

Her quiet dignity and poise, the fine bearing of her slim and graceful body, drew his appreciative glance, and a pleasant warmth gathered in him.

"Guess you've caught me fair and square," he answered her with mock seriousness. "But now you're here, maybe you'd help me out with a little personal problem."

"A personal problem? I'm afraid I couldn't be of much help—unless it's a lady's bonnet you're interested in."

Tom Garrison cocked his glance at her trim blue sailor. It set back becomingly on a pile of gleaming jet curls.

"*One* lady's hat I'm always interested in," he plunged awkwardly.

"Are you trying to flatter me?"

He shook his head, his gray eyes completely sober. "Flattery's for those who can't honestly be complimented. But about my problem, now. I need your advice about some material."

"Material, Tom?"

"That dress material, over there." He nodded to the shelves behind the littered counter, where Sol Tetherow's bolts of dress cloth lay stacked in neat and orderly parallelograms. "I have to make a sort of—wedding present. Something for a dress."

"Really, Tom!" Sol Tetherow had gone forward to wait on a customer, and color flamed in Ann Bretherton's cheeks. "Why, I—I'd hardly know where to begin."

"Begin," said Tom Garrison, "anywhere.

I'm pretty sure whatever you picked would meet with the lady's approval," and for a bare second their glances locked and held in secret understanding.

"Well, that dove-gray is very lovely, Tom. Only don't blame me, now, if your friend doesn't like it."

"I wouldn't worry about that," Tom Garrison smiled, and then Sol Tetherow came back and Ann made her purchase of a spool of No. 60 black thread and left.

THE little storekeeper waited until she had gone out the door before he said, cautiously: "What *are* you going to do about Ed Bretherton, Tom?"

"Give him one more chance," Tom Garrison answered in a flat voice. "To get out and stay out."

"And if he don't git, Tom?"

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it, Sol."

The storekeeper shook his head. "Them Brethertons are a prideful clan, Tom. And Ed's growed some since you booted him off the reservation two years ago. Hear he's coyotin' around now with Pete Lacelee, the gambler."

"Where's Lacelee hanging out, Sol?"

"Over at the Big Casino, most likely. But damn it, Tom, you don't have to go lookin' for it."

"My job, Sol." Tom Garrison started towards the door, then halted and turned suddenly, remembering.

"Oh, Sol. Measure me out about six yards of that dove-gray cloth there, will you? I'll pick it up later."

"Six yards, you bet," Sol said. Then a sly grin brought a pucker to his bleached blue eyes. "Or I could deliver it to her for you, Tom."

"Wrap it up fancy," Tom Garrison said. "In a box." He reached the door and glanced back. "All right. Deliver it," he said, and went out.

At the Big Casino he found his deputy, Jack Stever, over at the bar, talking to Steve Ludovic, the cattle buyer. He gave Stever a beckoning nod, and the stocky little deputy left the bar and sauntered over.

"Looking for Pete Lacelee," Tom Garrison said.

Stever jerked his thumb as a pointer. "Just one game on. He's with Bretherton and a couple of Rafter C boys back there."

Tom Garrison said, "Thanks, Jack. Keep an eye on things," and moved through the bar crowd to the gambling alcove in the rear.

It was easy picking out Ed Bretherton from the four men seated about the round-topped poker table. He was, like Ann, dark and slender, but his pale eyes were nervously alert and his loose-hinged mouth drooped in a chronically sullen expression.

Tom Garrison gave the two cowpunchers a short glance and put his attention on the fourth player: a big, florid-faced man with a silky blond mustache, oil-slicked blond hair, and cold, ash-colored eyes that studied the two tired-looking cowhands with a hard and continuing interest.

The marshal stepped up to the table and said, "Lacelee?" and the blond man looked up with a start.

"That's right, friend. Anything I can do for you?"

"Just one thing, Lacelee. Get out of town."

Pete Lacelee stiffened; then his glance narrowed upon the star pinned to Tom Garrison's white shirt. "But this is just a friendly little game, Marshal. You can't—"

"I want you out of here," Tom Garrison said, and shuttled his glance to the two Rafter C men. "You boys drag it," he said, "while you've still got your shirts. And next time you're in town, don't play with tinhorns."

"But we're a hundred in the hole!" protested one. "Give us a chance to—"

"Pull out," said Tom Garrison, and pushed his hard gaze at Ed Bretherton. "Bretherton?"

Ed Bretherton pushed back in his chair and gave the marshal a cool and steady stare. Then, deliberately, he winked at Pete Lacelee.

"It's all right, Pete," he said in a mild voice. "The marshal's gonna be wearin' apron strings before long, I hear. And Annie wouldn't like it if he got too curious about a certain brother of hers. She—"

With his big left hand, Tom Garrison grabbed him by the shirt collar. He jerked, and the collar tightened throttlingly around Ed Bretherton's neck, cutting off his wind.

Pete Lacelee's right hand swept towards his hip. Tom Garrison's right hand was quicker, and now it was up, leveling a .45 Colt.

"Don't try it, Lacelee," Tom Garrison said softly, and nodded to one of the Rafter C men. "Shuck his gun, bub. And here—" he drew Ed Bretherton's gun from its holster and threw it on the table—"take this one, too. Check 'em with the bartender."

Pete Lacelee spoke with a soft and bitter vehemence. "Damn you, Garrison, you had nothing on us. Don't try this again—that's a fair warning."

Tom Garrison said mildly, "I hand out the warnings in this town, Lacelee," and knew, from the way the gambler coldly contained his rage, that he had made a dangerous enemy. He said, "If you and Bretherton are still in Tribes Hill by four o'clock, I'm coming after you."

He had relaxed his grip on Ed Bretherton's collar, and now Bretherton abruptly twisted

around and flung his words with a savage fury, "You can come and be damned to you!"

"We'll be seeing you, Marshal," Pete Lacelee said meagerly.

Tom Garrison said, "Four o'clock," and wheeled around. The silence in the saloon held until he reached the batwing doors and rammed them open. Then it broke behind him in a murmurous, excited babble of voices.

AN HOUR later, while on his way to a belated lunch at the Prairie Queen Lunch Room, he saw Ann beckoning to him urgently from the window of her Bon Ton Millinery. He lifted his hat; then, with sharp misgivings, cut diagonally across the street and went up the little wooden step into the shop.

Ann came around the short counter from her workshop to meet him, and he was startled by the change that had taken place in her. Her face was pinched and drawn, and her eyes had a harried look.

Before he could speak, she said, "Jack Stever told me, Tom. Tom, you mustn't let it happen. You *can't* let it happen."

He shook his head, unable to meet the sudden frightened, stricken look in her eyes. "It will, if he doesn't get out of town. He's got to get out, Ann."

"All right—but give me until tomorrow, Tom . . . just until tomorrow. Then he'll go—I promise you! It will save his pride. It—it's the one decent thing he has left, Tom."

"Pride," Tom Garrison said. He lifted his shoulders, then let them drop heavily. "I've told him to be out of town by four o'clock, Ann. I can't go back on that."

She flinched as if he had struck her, and her voice went up in sharp and sudden anger. "You could quit your job!" she retorted fiercely. "You could take that silly badge and throw it back in Mike Abreen's face! You promised you would anyway as soon—as soon as—"

Her voice broke, and he said tiredly, "It's too late, Ann. I don't know about Ed, but Pete Lacelee's a killer, and Ed's siding him. If I turned in my badge now, people would call me a quitter. They'd say I'd run out—"

"*People!*" She threw the word back at him passionately, scornfully. "Do you think what people would say could make any difference to me? Do you worry about that more than you do about me? Oh, why can't you *bend* just a little, for once in your life?" She fought to control herself, then said with a flat, cold calmness in her voice, "Tom, if you walk out of this room without promising me you'll wait, I'm never going to see you again."

He looked at her, so slim and lovely and desirable, and had again his bitter awareness of the pattern; the immutable pattern that allowed no tolerance even for pride, and was like an inexorable tide, sweeping him from the most precious thing in his life.

He said in a voice that sounded strangely unlike his own, "Try and get him to ride out, Ann," and walked to the door. He turned there, his hand on the knob, and looked back. She had dropped into a chair and was sobbing quietly, her head buried in her hands.

He stood staring at her for a warped and crazy moment, building this last picture of her in his mind; then he twisted the knob, and stepped heavily down to the boardwalk. . . .

HE HAD found the gray cloth, and the note from Ann, waiting for him when he had returned to the hotel, fifteen minutes before four o'clock. And now, as he stood gazing down upon the mid-afternoon somnolence of Main Street, his mind held the somber thought of how quickly and devastatingly that slumbrous quiet could be shattered by the battering concussion of gunfire.

He had no clear, pre-conceived plan for what must now take place. He was a man who had always let circumstance shape his approach to any given situation; he was also, by nature, a fatalist, certain that in all this there was a grim inevitability. And so, he reasoned, what was to happen this afternoon would be just another piece fitted by Fate into the preordained pattern of his life.

First, Mary; and now Ann. He was not meant to know the kind of happiness that, for most men, seemed to fruit naturally from knowing and loving one woman. A man's life ran in its predestined groove, and nothing he could do could change the channel or alter the pattern.

Downstairs, he found Jack Stever in the lobby. The deputy, at his approach, jumped up from his chair and hurried to meet him, and some obvious urgency in his manner halted Tom Garrison in his tracks.

"You can cancel that appointment with Ed Bretherton, Tom," Stever began with eager satisfaction. "Pete Lacelee's claiming Bretherton cold-decked him in some private deal they had, and the report's around town they're out to get each other." Then, as Tom Garrison continued to stare at him without any sign of emotion: "Well, don't that mean anything to you? This is your out, Tom. Let 'em kill each other, and you got nothing more to worry about."

"No?" said Tom Garrison softly. "I'd *like* to look at it that way, Jack."

"Like to! Well do it then, damn it!"

The marshal shook his head, slowly, a little tiredly. "I've rodded the law quite a few years, Jack, and at my age a man don't change his ways. I never backed down from a job yet."

"But damn it," Jack Stever exploded with angry impatience, "who says you'd be backing

down from anything? You'd just be letting that pair of tinhorn saddle tramps dig their own graves!" He added earnestly, almost bitterly: "We've been friends a long time, Tom, you and me. I know what this means to you, and if you go through with it, you're loco!"

Tom Garrison said slowly, consideringly, "Maybe you're right. But don't go feeding off your range, Jack," and he gave the deputy a steady look and went on to the door.

Outside, the town seemed quiet; a kind of ominous quiet, like the impalpable, smothering hush that blankets the earth before a thunderstorm.

Faces appeared at windows, and the eyes of watchers followed him with a morbid curiosity as he passed by the rows of false-fronted stores and saloons, but he did not let this divert his steady attention from the street. The Alhambra was two blocks away; two doors on was the Totem Pole, and directly across the street from the Totem Pole was the Big Casino. His man—or men—would likely be in one of those three places.

His mind caressed the thought: *I still have two minutes to change my mind about this,* but the reflection brought no break in his even, deliberate stride.

He was still a block away when he saw the Alhambra's batwings swing outward. A man came out and stood shadowed briefly under the low wooden awning; then he stepped down to the boardwalk and out into the street, taking up a position midway between the Alhambra and Ad Peckinbaugh's livery office.

At the same moment the marshal went off the walk and into the road, his boot heels scratching up bursts of dust that drifted away behind him like tiny silvery balloons.

When he was thirty yards from the Alhambra, Ed Bretherton laid his flat, dead-toned words across the interval: "That's far enough, Marshal," and Tom Garrison halted.

"Better not kick up a fuss, Ed," he said. "I'm taking you in." And he started forward again.

"By God," Ed Bretherton cried, "I warned you!" The nickel-plated barrel of his Colt flashed like a silver dollar thrown up to the sun, but Tom Garrison did not alter his even, unhurried stride.

"Damn you, stop!" Ed Bretherton blurted hoarsely. "This is your last chance, Garrison! You can't buffalo me!"

Tom Garrison said, without breaking stride: "Put up that gun, Ed," and wondered, now, if there was really a chance he might break the kid's nerve. He cut the distance between them to fifteen yards; to fourteen; thirteen....

The gun in Ed Bretherton's fist bucked, roared.

The jolting force of the slug flung Tom Garrison's right arm back. He stopped and stared down with a mild curiosity at the blood thickening on his wrist.

He looked up and grinned stiffly: "Bum shot, kid; you got buck fever," and started on again.

"You crazy fool!" Ed Bretherton screamed. "You big dumb ox! I'll—"

The shot didn't come from Ed Bretherton's gun. It was a muffled, wall-trapped explosion from the narrow alley between the Alhambra and Peckinbaugh's livery, and the bullet was so close Tom Garrison felt it fan his cheek. He dropped; at the same instant he saw Ed Bretherton spin at a half crouch, and then he saw Pete Lacelee.

Lacelee was laying for me there, he thought; *he figured the kid would spook and miss me, and then he would kill me and Bretherton would be blamed for it.*

The big gambler stood in the mouth of the alley, the gun in his hand still dribbling smoke. He took a cautious step out from the passageway.

At the same instant Tom Garrison heard Bretherton's furious cry: "You cheap, double-crossing tinhorn!" and then came two more shots, so thinly spaced they seemed to blend in a single concussion.

Ed Bretherton had telegraphed his intention, but Pete Lacelee had still been a surprised man seeing Bretherton's gun suddenly swiveling in his direction. Lacelee had shifted his aim and hurried his shot, while Bretherton had coolly taken time and fired deliberately.

Shock brought a look of stiff astonishment to Pete Lacelee's broad face as he staggered back. For a moment he stood with both hands flattened against the Alhambra's red clapboards, struggling to hold himself erect. Then his fingers started to slip and he clutched suddenly at his belly like a man caught with a violent cramp. Simultaneously his knees bent and he folded forward, plunging into the powdery dust with a soft, spanking sound.

Painfully, Tom Garrison levered himself up to his feet. His wrist throbbed with a fury that reached all the way to his shoulder. He pulled a blue-checked bandanna from a back pocket of his breeches and tightened it around his bleeding wrist. Then, advancing with a jerky, lunging step, he reached Ed Bretherton and held out his hand.

"Ed, I'll take that gun, now," he said.

"By God," breathed Ed Bretherton softly. "By God!"

A HALF hour later, after Doc Hammersmith had dressed his wound and put his arm in a sling, he ran into Mike Abreen in front of the Totem Pole. The Mayor was a dumpy, ruddy-cheeked little Irishman who drank a quart of whiskey a day—for his asthma, he said.

The Mayor halted at sight of the marshal and stared at his bandaged arm. He ran a hand over his stubbled jaw.

"Humph! The right one, h'mmm? What'd Doc say?"

"Jack Stever," Tom Garrison said, "will make you a good marshal, Mike. He's a damned good boy."

"Who the hell wants Stever?" said Abreen. "Come into the Totem Pole. I'll buy you a drink."

"Some other time, Mike. I've got to get back to the hotel."

He made his way rapidly upstreet towards the McSorley House. He didn't want to talk to anybody now; he wanted to get away, wanted to forget. *I'll never forget,* he thought; *but it will help if I don't have to see all these familiar faces.*

Doc Hammersmith had told him his gun arm would always be a little stiff, so now he had a stiff arm to go with his stiff-necked pride. It sure as hell looked as though his town-taming days were over, whether he liked it or not. Well, let the damn thing go as she lay.

That's funny, he thought with a vast self-pity; *that's funny as hell,* and then a feeling of cold emptiness gutted him as he thought of Ann, remembered Ann's last words to him: "Tom, if you walk out of this room without promising you'll wait, I'm never going to see you again."

Life was as casual, as cruel, as that. He remembered the closing line of her note: "It so easily might have been the other way. . . ." But she was wrong, there; it was meant to be the way it was, and nothing could change it because the pattern for this had been fixed the day he'd been born.

At the McSorley House he turned in mechanically and made his way to the veranda, the thought hitting him, with bitter impact, that this would be the last time; he would pack his warbag, he would make one last trip down the worn, familiarly creaky stairs, and he would never come back. . . . There would be another town. . . .

He was glad the lobby was empty as he passed through it. He tramped up the stairs, pushed open the door to his room, and went in.

She was seated on the bed, fondling the dove-gray cloth, and his heart gave a startled lurch at the sight of her.

"Ann!"

She looked up, then, and he could see the redness of her eyes from the tears that had been there.

"Tom," she said, "can you forgive a woman for being a feather-brained idiot? Oh, Tom! He might have killed you! He might have crippled you for life!"

He could not speak; there was a great roaring in his ears, and his tongue seemed lashed to the roof of his mouth.

"Well?" she said. She was standing now, her hands pressed to her breast.

He went to her, then, and the sun slanting through the still closed blinds seemed to throw a radiant new design upon the floor. It was the same sun, laying the same familiar pattern on the naked boards, but somehow it seemed very fresh and new and incredibly brilliant.

THE FIRE DEVILS OF MYSTERY CANYON

Action-Packed Novel of the Cattle Country

By Tom Roan

Young Cass Laramie, with a price on his head, and ex-outlaw Tuneful Sam Golightly play their own gun game in the death fight between the Mystery Canyon cattlemen and the marauding firebug killers.

Also novelettes and shorts by Tom W. Blackburn, Art Lawson, Frank Bonham, Philip Ketchum and others in the October issue. . . . On sale—September 11th.

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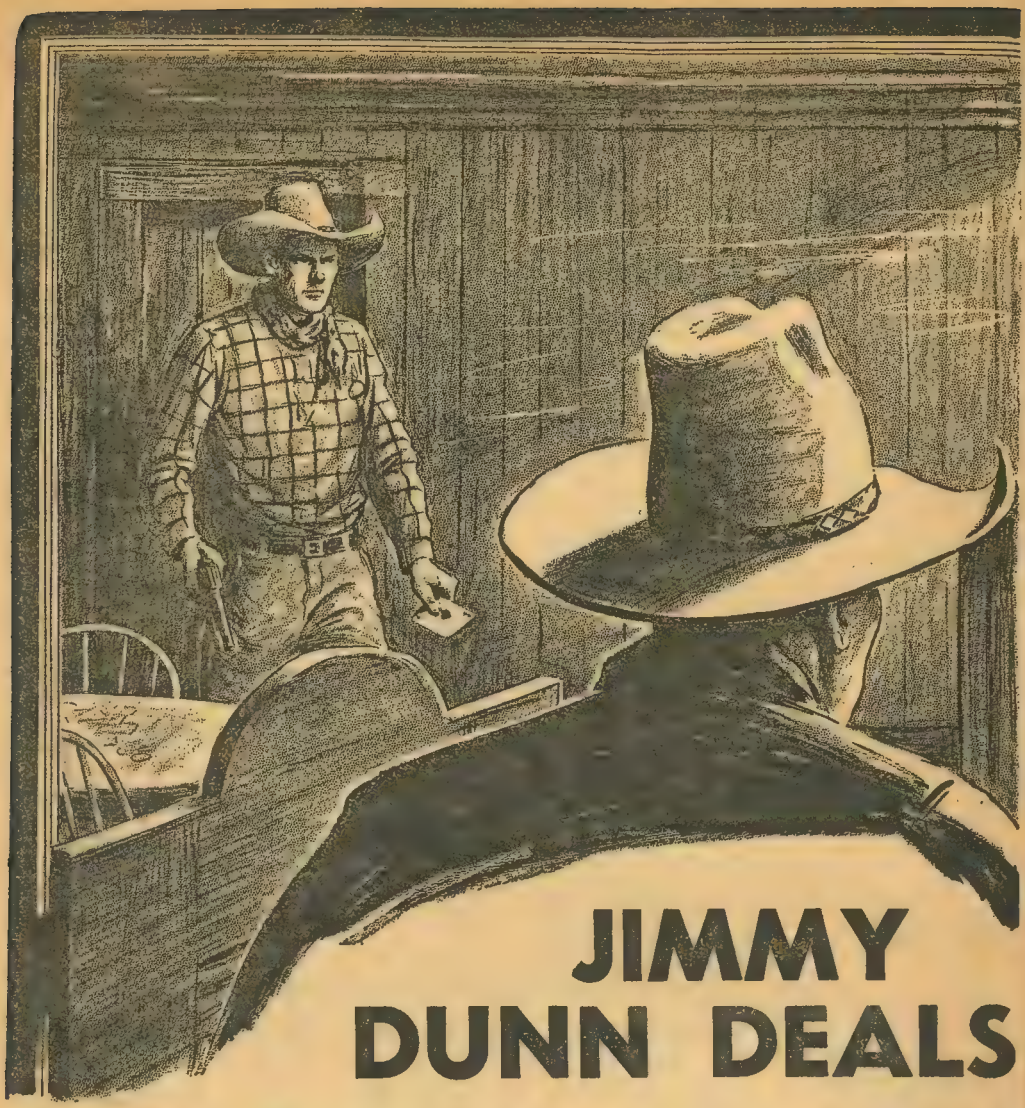
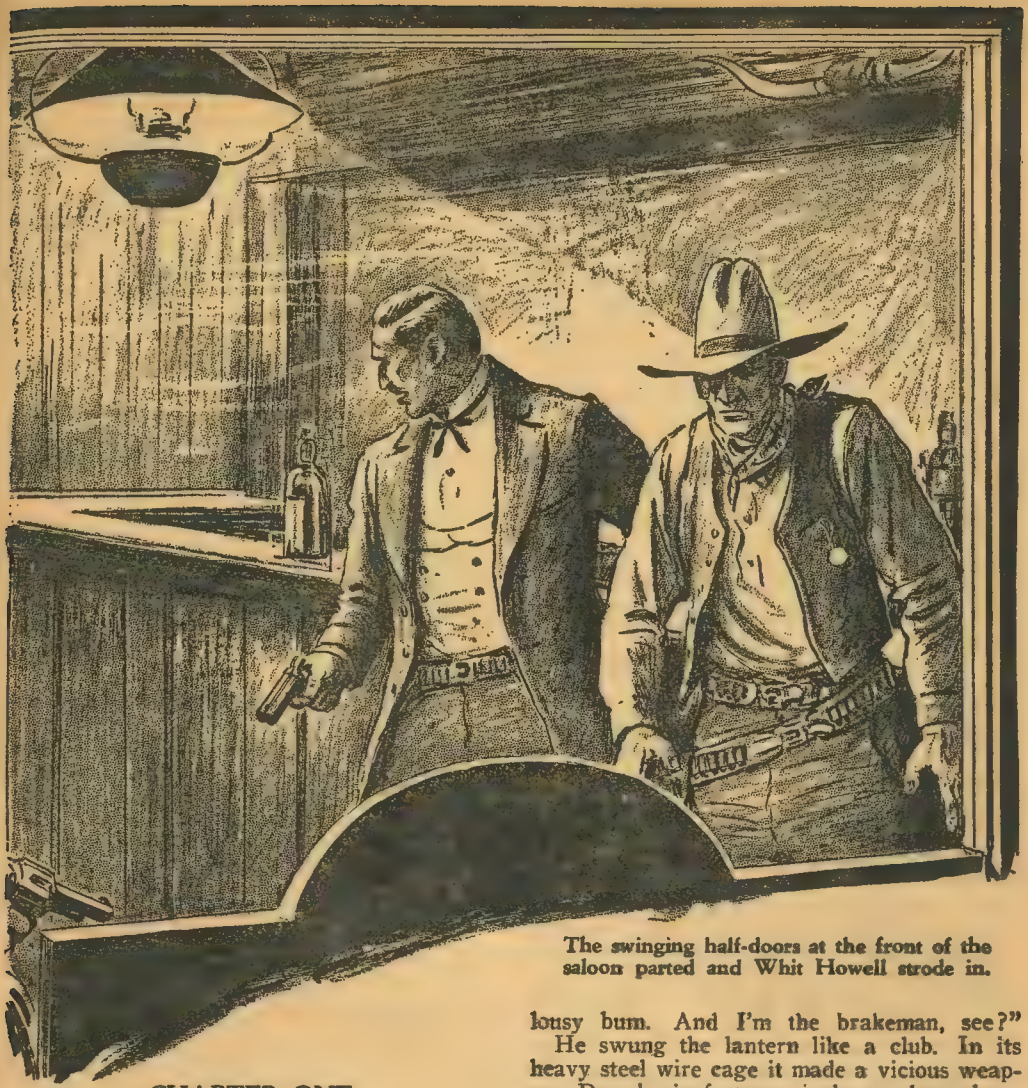


JIMMY DUNN DEALS THE BOOTHILL ACE!

A Smashing Frontier Novel

By WALT COBURN

Jimmy Dunn rode a thousand twisted, perilous miles to answer that six-shooter S.O.S., packing in his prison-dusty jeans the fatal Ace of Spades, passport to the allegiance of the Northwest's gambling king. But in Prairie, Montana, Jimmy found his saddle-mate mouldering in his cold six-by-three plot—leaving Dunn to be executed by that same sinister Spade-Ace!



The swinging half-doors at the front of the saloon parted and Whit Howell strode in.

CHAPTER ONE

A Stack of Yellow Chips

SOMETIME between midnight and daybreak the Eastbound stopped at a little Montana prairie cowtown for coal and water and Jimmy Dunn moved from his cramped position at the blind end of the baggage car and climbed stiffly down onto the wide plank platform. He all but collided with the brakeman who walked alongside the passenger train carrying a lighted lantern.

Jimmy Dunn grinned into the lantern light and the brakeman's scowl. "What town is this, conductor?"

"This is a tank town whistle stop they call Prairie." The lantern was held high to get a better look. "End of the line for you, you lousy bum. And I'm the brakeman, see?"

He swung the lantern like a club. In its heavy steel wire cage it made a vicious weapon. Dunn's six feet two inches and one hundred and sixty pounds must have looked puny to the tall brakeman.

Jimmy Dunn ducked the swinging lantern that would have knocked him down if it had connected. He timed it for the split second when his swing threw the brakeman off balance. His fist made a spatting sound as it hit the point of the brakeman's jaw and it had all of Dunn's weight behind it. The blue-uniformed brakeman went down and his brass buttons shone in the lantern light. He lay sprawled on the wide plank platform in front of the dingy railroad station. Jimmy picked up the lantern and set it carefully down at the brakeman's head on which rode the blue serge black-visored cap with its BRAKEMAN in shining metal. All this happened just as the conductor came out of the little station with his

tissue paper train orders tight in his hand.

A hundred yards away were blobs of light where a half dozen saloons lined the main and only street of Prairie, Montana. Jimmy Dunn headed for the saloons with the short, quick stride of a cowpuncher on foot. Husky-shouldered, lean-flanked and a little bowlegged, Dunn whistled tunelessly through grinning teeth. He felt good right now. Better than he'd felt in a long time. Months. That sour-tempered brakeman had called him a lousy bum. And for the first time in many a long moon Jimmy Dunn had been able to pay back an insult. It made him feel like a man again.

"I hate a railroader." He grinned when he said it.

Some of the saloons had signs. He located the one called MONTE'S and went around back. There he found a lean-to shed, a bucket of water, a big battered tin basin and a bar of strong-smelling yellow soap. He slapped the dust and soot from his sweat-marked old Stetson that had cost him fifty dollars, a year ago. And he took off the faded denim brush jumper he was wearing and shook what travel grime he could from it. Then he rolled up his sleeves and for five minutes did the best he could with cold water and laundry soap. He used his shirt-tail to dry his face and close-cropped wiry black hair.

His levi overalls were faded and grimed. His boots rusty. In the dim light he grinned at his reflection in a broken mirror tacked to the wall of the shed. He saw a square face with a week's stubble. Puckered gray eyes set under level black brows. A short nose that looked blunted because it had been broken once and badly set. He looked tough. Grimed from riding the rods and blind baggage from as far south as the Mexican border. A hard looking customer and no mistake. But that railroader had no right to call him a lousy bum. Hadn't that ignorant two-bit son ever heard that saying that clothes don't make the man?

Jimmy Dunn went into Monte's by way of the back door, blinking his bloodshot eyes a little till they focused to the light. Wind whipped, cinder stung eyes.

There was a long bar. Half a dozen gambling layouts. Roulette, faro, stud, draw, blackjack, a crap table. All getting a good play. The one bartender was busy as a bird dog. It looked like Monte Carson was doing all right for himself at his new location at Prairie. Dunn couldn't see Monte anywhere but he caught sight of Shirley and his heart skipped a beat and began pounding in his throat like it always did when he looked at her.

Shirley Carson was Monte's adopted daughter and she had cut her baby teeth on poker chips. She was a better dealer when she was sixteen than most professionals. Now she was in her twenties, and she had the roulette wheel tonight. In a tailored black outfit with white collar and cuffs she looked like a convent girl. Her dark red hair done different than Jimmy remembered. Black-fringed green eyes. Small and slim and trim. Skin like cream-colored velvet. Slim, quick hands. Her wheel was getting more play than all the other games put together. It had always been like that. And the old blind red rage of jealousy burned like raw whiskey in Jimmy Dunn's veins. . . . She didn't see him.

"Git a tail holt on it, Jimmy," he gritted.

HE SAW Deacon dealing blackjack. Silvery haired, freshly barbered, tailored in a salt-and-pepper suit, looking more like a banker than a professional gambler, a green eyeshade protecting his hard, pale blue eyes. Wearing the horn-rimmed spectacles he called his "readers." The Deacon was ageless. He had looked like that ten years ago, the first time Jimmy Dunn had ever seen him. That was when Shirley was sixteen. When Jimmy was twenty. Same Deacon. The Deacon hadn't sighted him.

But Jack LaGrange had watched him come in. LaGrange wasn't dealing. He sat in the high lookout chair that looked like an overgrown high-chair. And his hand was on his gun. LaGrange had sleek black hair that shone like patent leather. There was a snow white streak down the middle. It gave him a look of distinction. Jimmy Dunn had made an enemy of LaGrange years ago when he had likened it to the white streak down the back of a skunk. There was hatred now in LaGrange's amber eyes. And at sight of Dunn his olive skin had paled a little.

Jimmy Dunn saw LaGrange eyeing him and grinned faintly. And he looked around again for Monte Carson but didn't see anything of him. But if Monte was on one of his periodic drunks he would be holed up somewhere alone. Like a poisoned dog.

Dunn was broke. He walked over to the blackjack game. The Deacon looked up from under his eyeshade. Poker faced. No more than a tiny flicker of cold recognition. He took out the hundred dollar bill he always carried in his watch pocket and spread it flat with the money in front of him that had been paid into his bank for chips. And shoved a hundred dollars in five dollar yellow chips toward Jimmy Dunn.

Jimmy ran it up to two hundred and cashed in. Deacon took out a hundred. Jimmy Dunn pocketed his money and walked to the bar. The bartender was a stranger. Jimmy shoved a ten dollar bill across the bar and said, "Monte's Monogram." He took the bottle and shot glass and filled it and leaned with his back against the bar and the heel of a rusty boot

hooked over the brass rail. He downed his drink and it burned down his throat and into his empty belly like liquid fire. He filled the glass again and leaned there with the bottle in one hand and his drink in the other. He saw LaGrange motion one of the bouncers. Whisper something to him. The bouncer nodded his bullet head and moved through the crowd and around to where Shirley was dealing. He said something to her.

Jimmy Dunn saw Shirley stiffen like she'd been slapped. She looked up and straight at Jimmy Dunn and her face whitened. Then she motioned one of the substitute dealers and he took the wheel. Shirley walked past La Grange without a glance and she never looked towards Jimmy Dunn at all but went out through the swinging half doors.

Jimmy Dunn downed his second drink and set the empty glass and bottle on the bar and walked out without picking up his change. The bartender stared after him, shrugged his white-jacketed shoulders, then picked up Jimmy's change and laid it carefully on the backbar, weighting the bills with the silver.

Jimmy saw Shirley go into the restaurant and followed her in. She was sitting at a table for two in a far corner and he took the chair across from her. From under almost heavy black brows her eyes were as cold green as ice. No trace of warmth. No welcome. No flicker of friendship.

"Well?" Her voice matched the coldness of her green eyes.

"You pack a grudge," Jimmy Dunn tried to grin, "a long time, Shirley."

"That man you killed," she said, "will stay dead a long time."

"When a man like Cranston," said Jimmy Dunn quietly, "makes the kind of a play he did for a girl like you, somebody has to kill him. That's muddy water under the old bridge. Where's Monte?"

Shirley Carson's green eyes stared across the table at him. They were gambler's eyes studying him, reading him.

"Monte was killed ten nights ago," Shirley Carson's voice was toneless, "when they held up the place. Monte Carson is dead."

CHAPTER TWO

Trail of the Ace of Spades

THE color drained from Jimmy Dunn's face, leaving it a muddy yellow and where the cinders had pitted his skin the black specks looked like gunpowder burns. He turned his head and stared down at the oilcloth until he got hold of his grief. His hands were on the table and he clenched them until the knuckles showed bone white. Then they opened, very slowly.

Shirley Carson was looking at Jimmy's hands. They were calloused, and the short nails on the fingers were broken. They were the hands of a laboring man. And when last she had seen those same hands they were well kept and deft. The hands of a cowpuncher-gambler.

Jimmy caught her looking at his hands. And found his voice. "They're usin' convict labor to build a road through the Arizona mountains to a resort where the rich folks go to git outa the summer heat. They was short handed, so I bin helpin' 'em out. Pick and shovel."

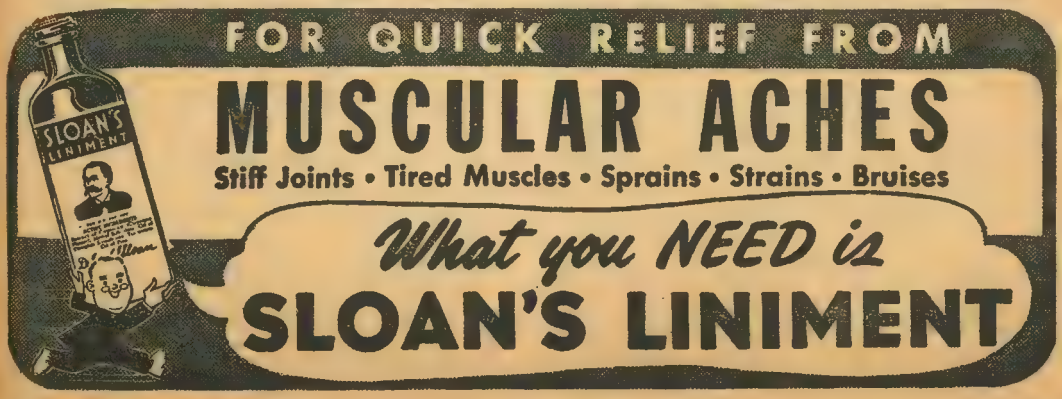
"You mean," her voice was almost a whisper, "they caught up with you?"

Jimmy Dunn shook his head. "It was another deal. One of them Border cowmen figgered he was a gambler. He run short of chips in a stud game. Bet his outfit against what he'd lost. We cut high card. I won his outfit. When he bawled that I'd crooked him, I worked him over. There's a law against it in Arizona. That's all." His eyes looked into hers.

"Who killed Monte?" Dunn's voice was quiet. Too quiet.

A hand gripped Jimmy's shoulder. He tensed like a coiled rattler.

"Take it easy, Jimmy."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Jimmy Dunn relaxed. It was the Deacon. He pulled up a chair and sat down.

"It was foolish of you to come back to Montana, Jimmy." The Deacon had a cultured voice. "Prairie isn't Miles City. But it's in Montana. And there's an indictment—"

"Who killed Monte?" Dunn put the question to the Deacon.

"LaGrange saw you, Jimmy. He never liked you. He's dangerous. He'd spend the last dollar he's got to hang you."

"Who killed Monte?"

"LaGrange owns the place," the Deacon went on. "Shirley sold out to him after Monte's death."

Shirley Carson tossed a thick roll of banknotes, bound by a heavy rubber band, onto the oilcloth-covered table.

"Take it and get out of town, out of Montana," she said. "Quit the country. Don't come back."

Jimmy Dunn picked up the roll of money. Hefted it in his calloused hand. His eyes were bloodshot, glinting with a terrible fury that burned like the raw whiskey he'd splashed into an empty belly. And under his hard stare her face flushed and her green eyes slid away. He tossed the money back at her with a twisted grin.

Then he saw the engagement ring on her left hand. A diamond and an emerald. The stones square cut. Worth a small fortune. The emeralds matched the green of her eyes.

"Shirley," said the Deacon quietly, "is getting married soon. Allowing for a decent interval so that the death of her father won't darken the wedding festivities. He's a young cattleman. Owns the Anchor outfit. Shirley is to be congratulated, Jimmy."

"I didn't break out of a prison road camp and ride the rods from the Mexican border to up near the Canadian line to congratulate Shirley."

SHIRLEY CARSON pushed back her chair. Her face was white and spots of red stained her cheekbones. She was squinting her eyes against the tears. Tears didn't come easy for the adopted daughter of Monte Carson, gambler. And she got out of there before she let them see her show any weakness.

When she had gone the Deacon called the Chinaman and order steak and everything that went with it. He asked Jimmy Dunn when he'd had his last square meal. Dunn said he couldn't remember.

Jimmy Dunn took a playing card from the pocket of his overalls. It was the ace of spades.

"It came in an envelope postmarked Prairie, Montana," Dunn said softly. "Forwarded from the Diamond A ranch where I'd bin ridin' the rough string when I last wrote Monte. A guard at the prison road camp handed it to me. You know what the ace of spades meant between Monte and you and me. It meant trouble threatened, and I got away that night. And got here as fast as I could make it. The postmark on the envelope was weeks old. I got here too damned late!"

The Deacon looked at the calloused hands, then into the cold eyes of young Jimmy Dunn. And the eyes of the silvery haired gambler softened.

"There is a thing," the Deacon said softly, "called loyalty. I have seen it in a few men. A few . . . and never in a woman. Loyalty marks you like a brand." The Deacon smiled bleakly. "It can destroy you."

Dunn shook his wiry black head. "I can't remember having a mother or father. I ran wild. I was headed in the wrong direction when Carson tripped me up. He gave me the only home I ever had. Treated me like I was his own son. Sent me to school. When I wanted to be a gambler, he showed me the ropes. But he never encouraged it. I'd punched cows all my life. He bought a little outfit and I ran it.

"I was making it pay when that damned tinhorn Cranston showed up around Miles City and began making his fancy play for Shirley, and her no more than a school kid. Monte had told me she was to be my kid sister; my job was to give her a big brother's protection—and I did. The only way to stop Cranston was with a gun. So I stopped him in his tracks. I gave that son an even break for his fancy six-shooter and beat him to it. I'd do it that way if it had to be done again. Monte covered for me and I hit the trail for Mexico. But Shirley will hate me for it as long as she lives."

The Deacon shook his head. "You're wrong, Jimmy. But we won't discuss that now."

"No. Not now." Jimmy Dunn picked up the ace of spades. "Lay it on the line for me, Deacon. Then stake me to a gun. Monte needed me. He sent for me and I got here too late. Too late to side him. But not too late to take it up where he had to drop it. Who killed Monte Carson?"

"If I knew the right answer to that," the Deacon said quietly, "I'd have no need to get you a gun. The job would be taken care of. I was on shift the night it happened. And Monte was alone at his house. He was on one of his drunks and when he was like that he wanted to be left alone.

"Some renegades held up the saloon. I was running the place. LaGrange sat in the lookout chair. But with Shirley there in the thick of it we didn't dare start shooting. There were half a dozen of them and they had their faces covered with black masks and wore saddle slickers. I told 'em to take what they

wanted and clear out. That we couldn't make it a gun fight on account of the girl being underfoot.

"They got away with about seven thousand dollars and fogged their way out of town. It wasn't until I went to his house with Shirley to take him the bad news, that I found out the hold-up was only half of it. They had stopped at the house and murdered Monte. Shot him down while he was blind, hopelessly drunk. That's it, Jimmy."

JIMMY DUNN sat hunched in his chair like a prizefighter on his stool in a ring corner waiting for the tap of the gong. Tense, hard-eyed, silent while he listened to the Deacon tell how Monte Carson had been murdered. Jimmy remembered too well those ugly black drunks that used to creep up on Monte Carson from behind and pull him down. And he had stood helplessly back and watched the tall, iron gray, handsome, well-groomed gambling man slowly turn into a whiskered, slovenly, shambling, glaze-eyed derelict whose every faculty was undermined by the booze he guzzled until he slipped into black oblivion.

The drunk would last a week or two. And while it lasted Jimmy Dunn had always been there on guard, night and day, to let nobody near Monte Carson, who stayed inside his house behind drawn blinds and locked doors. The man was too proud to let anybody see him in that sodden state—especially his adopted daughter Shirley. Dread of his enemies was secondary. And while neither of them had ever mentioned it or let on in any way, Monte Carson had known that young Jimmy Dunn always was on guard and ready to shoot down any man who tried to get to the gambler while he was too drunk to defend himself. Because a man like Carson had enemies.

"I wish I'd been here." Jimmy hadn't meant to voice his brooding thoughts.

He saw the dark color come into the Deacon's face. He hadn't meant it as a reproach. But it was said and he wasn't taking it back. Behind the horn rimmed "readers" the Deacon's pale blue eyes were bleak.

"You're here now." The Deacon's voice was toneless.

The way he said it made Jimmy Dunn look up and into the pale blue eyes of the gambler.

"What are you tryin' to tell me, Deacon?"

"If you had been here, they'd have killed you." The Deacon reached out and took the ace of spades from Jimmy's hand. He examined it closely and a faint mirthless smile tightened the corners of his thin-lipped mouth as he took out a pin-seal wallet and put the playing card in it.

"Somebody sent you an invitation to your own funeral, Jimmy."

The Deacon never made a flat statement

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like that until he could back it up with proof. Jimmy Dunn knew that. He waited for the white-haired gambler to go on.

"Monte Carson had fewer enemies than any gambler I ever knew. That is what makes his killing such cold-blooded murder. Cold-blooded, premeditated and calculating. Do you recall the postmark date on the envelope that held the ace of spades, Jimmy?"

"April Fifth."

"And this is the fourteenth, rather the morning of the fifteenth of July. Monte Carson was killed the night of the Fourth of July. It took you this long to get here."

"They mislaid or held the letter down at the Diamond A ranch in Sonora. The Mexicans are like that. Manana is soon enough. And they were uncertain about sending it to the sheriff to deliver to me at the prison road camp. Mistrustful of the law. It finally got to me a week ago. Let's see. That'd be July the Seventh. It took me a week to get here. Best I could do the first night was a fast freight. I transferred to passenger train at the first division point. Rode nothing but the fastest mail trains from there on. I got here as fast as I could."

"Somebody," said the Deacon, "got impatient. And Monte Carson was murdered in a desperate effort to speed up your return to Montana. The irony of it is that you didn't know Monte Carson was dead until you got here. His murder was, therefore, wholly unnecessary. Sucker Jimmy Dunn grabbed the bait a little late, was all. Fate had kept it dangling out of reach for over three months. I could be wrong about this. But that's the way I read the backs of the marked cards somebody's dealing."

"You're gettin' ahead of me, Deacon. I've bin gone a couple of years. Bring me up to date on the news if you want me to see eye to eye with you. Are you tellin' me that Monte Carson didn't send me that ace of spades?"

"If he did, Jimmy, he did so without taking me into his confidence. And Monte never held out on the Deacon."

"How many men knew about the agreement Monte and I made? That if ever one of us was in bad trouble, he'd send an ace of spades. Who besides Monte and me and you knew about our ace of spades, Deacon?"

"Nobody." The Deacon took off his horn-rimmed "readers" and polished them with a spotless Irish linen handkerchief. And for a few moments his pale blue eyes looked sort of naked and they avoided Jimmy Dunn's searching scrutiny.

"Shirley." It wasn't a question. Jimmy Dunn made it a flat statement.

And inside his empty belly something as cold and slimy as a snake crawled.

The Deacon hooked on his "readers." Poker faced. Bleak eyed.

"I don't know, Jimmy. You'll have to ask Shirley."

The ageless Chinaman brought a huge platter. "Happy Day, Mista Jimmy!" He beamed.

Jimmy Dunn looked at the Chinaman for the first time. He had cooked for Jimmy at his little ranch near Miles City. He was called Happy Day.

"Happy Day!" Jimmy's grin was genuine as he gripped the Chinaman's hand.

CHAPTER THREE

Million Dollar Cowboy

JIMMY DUNN finished supper and he and the Deacon sat smoking. The restaurant door was flung open and six cowpunchers crowded in. They were all partly drunk.

The man in the lead had a half empty bottle in his hand. He was tall and slim with hair and eyebrows so blond they looked sun bleached. His sunburned face was redder from booze and his eyes were bloodshot. His boots were too fancy and his expensive Stetson had too high a crown and too wide a brim. His cartridge belt and holster were hand-carved and his pearl-handled six-shooter was silver-mounted like his spurs.

There was a swagger to his gait that was too long in stride for a real cowhand, and an arrogant tilt to his head that didn't belong out West. He was in his early thirties, handsome, with college stamped all over him. Too handsome. Like a white collar advertisement. Some rich dude gone Western. He let out his own version of a cowboy yell and it filled the restaurant. It had the sound of a college cheer to it.

But the man right behind him was no dude. And if he was drunk he was holding his liquor like a man. A six-footer and hard and lean. He had the coarse black hair and swarthy skin and hawk-beaked nose and high cheek bones of a 'breed. His eyes were black. His pant legs shoved in the tops of his boots, Texas style, and his hat creased after the Texas fashion. He looked to Jimmy Dunn like somebody he had known but couldn't quite remember. And he looked like a man you'd better not bother much.

The cowpunchers crowding in behind were likewise strangers to Dunn.

The dude cowboy jingled his spurs past the table where Jimmy Dunn and the Deacon sat. And went yelling his college cowboy yipping shouts into the kitchen. The 'breed cowhand and the others were shoving a couple of tables together and getting ready to sit down.

"Chicken, you heathen Chinee!" the dude cowboy was shouting in the kitchen. "Fried

chicken. To hell with your T-bones. I'm sick of steer meat. I want fried chicken! You pigtailed heathen Chinee! Yippie yi yay!"

He jingled his spurs back into the restaurant. And in one hand he had gripped the long-braided queue of Happy Day. The little Chinaman in his alpaca blouse padded along behind on felt-soled Chinese slippers, a look of shame and fear on his face and in his slanted red brown eyes.

Dunn went into action. He was up out of his chair and on his feet, both fists cocked, and he brought them up from somewhere near the floor. His right fist sank deep into the dude cowboy's belly below the brisket. A solar plexus blow that doubled the tall towhead up and twisted his red face in a spasm of pain. And Jimmy's left smashed into the sunburned face; there was the crack of a smashed nose and of teeth knocked out. Blood spouted. The cowboy's head snapped back so hard the big ten-gallon hat was knocked off. The grip on the Chinaman's queue let go. The dude cowboy was out cold before he hit the scrubbed pine board floor.

Happy Day sidled against Jimmy Dunn like a cowering dog. A blued steel .45 six-shooter slid from one loose sleeve of the black alpaca coat and into Jimmy Dunn's hand.

"Clanston!" hissed Happy Day. "Injun cowboy allee same blothah Jelly Clanston. Watchee!" The Chinaman ducked back into his kitchen.

Jimmy Dunn whirled and his back was against the wall and the gun in his hand was pointed at the lean belly of the 'breed.

The Deacon had the others covered. His toneless voice matched the bleak look in the gambler's blue eyes that were narrowed behind the horn rimmed "readers."

"How lucky do you feel, Cranston?"

The dark-complexioned cowpuncher bared white teeth in a flat-lipped grin. He lifted both hands to the level of his well-knit shoulders.

"Not lucky enough to buck a dead sure thing, tinhorn. Who's the range tramp with you?"

Dunn had heard Jerry Cranston, high stake gambler and sporting man, had a cowpuncher brother who was a sort of half-outlaw. The Cranstons came from down in the Cherokee Strip. They were quarter-breeds. They had money behind them somewhere. Jimmy Dunn had killed Jerry Cranston. Sooner or later he would have to kill the dead man's brother. He'd never get a better chance.

"Step out in the street with me," Jimmy Dunn said, "and I'll take up that question. Keep them drunken things off my back, Deacon, while I try this 'breed out for toughness. Let's take it outside and tie it up, Cranston. Just me'n you."

Arch Cranston grinned and shook his head. "The sign ain't right. I'm ridin' close herd on one million dollars." He nodded at the dude cowboy whose curly blond head was pillowed in a widening pool of blood. "You spoiled the purtiest face that ever come West," he added.

"Drag him outside," Jimmy Dunn said. "He'll start pukin' directly. And he's got the floor messed up as it is."

Arch Cranston told the cowpunchers to carry the Boss over to Monte's. His black eyes glittered and his flat grin widened.

"If he ties the can to my bushy tail tomorrow," he said, "it'll be worth it to see the look on Miss Shirley Carson's face when she gits a look at her purty boy. Handle Whitney Howell shore careful, boys. It ain't every day you git to pack a million dollar baby."

THEY carried the slim six-footer out, blood dripping from his smashed nose and slobber drooling from a slack mouth where broken front teeth left a gap.

Arch Cranston picked the ten-gallon hat up from the floor and followed them out. He paused at the open doorway, his hand on the doorknob.

"I'll take you up on that deal another time, mister," he told Jimmy Dunn. "When I do, I'll have the bulge." He closed the door when he went out.

The Deacon shoved a short-barreled .38 back into the shoulder holster under his tailored salt-and-pepper coat. He smiled thinly.

"Whitney Howell the Third." The Deacon's voice was soft. Almost as if there was a quiet chuckle hidden in it. "You've ruined his million dollar profile with a pair of mitts toughened by prison road gang labor. Championing the cause of a pigtailed Chinaman called Happy Day. . . ."

The Deacon took off his glasses and polished them. There was a twinkle in his bleak blue eyes that seldom flickered there.

"Just to keep you up to date, Jimmy. Whit Howell and his million dollar Anchor iron is what little Shirley Carson is going to marry."

Jimmy Dunn shoved the .45 six-shooter into the waistband of his dirty overalls and pulled on his old sweat-stained Stetson hat.

"Anyhow," he grinned crookedly, "I got the wrinkles outa my belly. I need a good horse, Deacon. And how far across this flat country is the badlands? I'll drift now. But I won't be too far gone. And you'll be seein' me when I've cut for snake sign and found it."

The Deacon said there was a little outfit across Milk River from the Anchor range. Monte Carson had picked it up and held onto it and stocked it with a few head of cattle.

Some of the old cowhands Jimmy knew from Miles City were pensioned off there and Jimmy would be as safe there as he would be in a church or jail. It was twenty miles down the river and on the north side. Monte Carson had Jimmy Dunn in mind when he got hold of the little outfit.

"As for snake sign, Jimmy, you're the man who can't see the forest on account of the tall trees."

Jimmy Dunn licked his skinned knuckles and scowled. There was a bitter twist to his grin.

"So that's what she's marryin'."

"She'll be Mrs. Whitney Howell the Third. The Howell Packing Company. There was a million dollars banked in his name the day he was born. Let that draw interest for thirty years and it runs into better than small change. This big Anchor outfit is no more than a playtoy for Whit Howell. There's a big home in Chicago and a place in Florida and another in California and a horse farm in Kentucky. He plays polo. And travels the seven seas in an ocean going yacht. He's got a racing stable and a string of polo ponies. Shirley Carson would be marrying all that. Go easy, Jimmy."

Dunn's fists opened and he looked at the hands he'd blistered and calloused at a prison camp. At his clothes that stank of stale sweat and train smoke. Empty pockets. The few dollars in them the handout from a gambling table. A murder indictment against him here in Montana. And he'd broken out of a prison road camp in Arizona with three more weeks to serve there on the road gang. A range orphan to begin with. And he hadn't done himself much good in the way of bettering his chances. A range tramp with a few charity dollars in his dirty pockets and a six-shooter borrowed from a Chinaman.

"I shore tore the deck, Deacon." His eyes were as cold as gun metal. "But I'll be damned if I kin feel sorry about it. Or pity myself. And if I told that red-headed kid I wished her happiness with the big, loud-mouthed millionaire, I'd be lyin' to her and to myself. I come quite a ways to side the best friend I had on earth. You tell me that ace of spades is a ticket to my own funeral. That's all right with me, Deacon. But before that ticket's punched with a bullet, I'll kill the man or the men that murdered Monte Carson."

"Amen to that," said the Deacon quietly. "Let's get on to the barn. The cowtown of Prairie won't be too healthy a climate for Jimmy Dunn after sunrise. LaGrange don't like you. And don't make the mistake of dealing LaGrange out."

Happy Day came out of the kitchen with a mop and bucket of hot soapy water. Jimmy Dunn knew better than to offer payment for the big meal he'd eaten. He grinned and the Chinaman beamed.

"Ketchum fly chicken lext time, Mista Jimmy. You betcha."

"I'll fetch you back the gun when I'm done usin' it. So long, Happy Day."

"So long, Mista Jimmy. Atch Clanston bad man. You watchee!"

"You bet."

THERE was a saddled horse waiting for Jimmy Dunn at the feed and livery barn. It was a gray dawn and the shadows inside the big log barn were still black and Jimmy Dunn pulled in his breath sharply when he saw Shirley Carson standing there beside the saddled horse. Even in that uncertain light he saw that she no longer wore the diamond and emerald engagement ring. Her face looked chalky white and dark shadows under her green eyes looked like bruises.

"The Law is looking for you." Shirley's voice sounded brittle. "Some railroad brakeman claims he was beaten up by a man that answers your description. LaGrange and Arch Cranston are making war medicine. You'd better drift yonderly and don't let the dust settle on you. The Deacon and I will hold 'em back till you've got some kind of a head start. I had the bartender slip the town marshal some knockout drops in his whiskey. But I can't handle the whole Anchor outfit with doped booze. You'd better go now. Get a long ways gone. Don't you come back . . . Ever. . . ."

Jimmy took the bridle reins from her ringless hand. "I'm glad you had sense enough," he grinned, "not to try to buy me off again."

She winced as if he had slapped her. Jimmy Dunn swung up into the saddle. His eyes were hard and gray and cold as lead.

"Did anybody ever tell you," he had to force the question through set teeth, "about the ace of spades?"

Shirley Carson reached out and gripped his saddle strings. "Monte told me," she said in that same brittle voice, "that if ever I needed Jimmy Dunn to go through hell for me, to send him the ace of spades. That you'd come. . . ."

"And you sent that ace of spades?"

"No."

"Did you ever tell anybody about the ace of spades?"

"I don't . . . remember. I might have used it as a threat . . . to keep LaGrange in his tinhorn place." She hung onto the saddle strings to keep from falling.

Deacon put an arm around her shoulders and she let go and he held her like that. She straightened slowly and the color came back into her cheeks. "Haven't you done enough damage for one night?" Her voice was tense.

"Not as much," Jimmy Dunn's voice sounded gritty, "as I hope to."

That was as near as Shirley Carson came to mentioning Whitney Howell—and his engagement ring she no longer wore. She looked as hurt as if she had been beaten up, but the beating was deep inside where it hurt the worst. But she had a pride and a will of her own and courage enough and she was fighting Jimmy Dunn now.

As for Dunn, if Shirley had been a man he would have done his tough best to beat that man to a bloody pulp.

They stood there by the horse's head, so close that the perfume of her dark red hair filled his nostrils and it was making him drunk. She was tilting her head a little to look into his eyes and the sprinkling of freckles across her short nose and her cheeks looked like specks of mud against her paled skin. And Jimmy remembered her as he had first seen her the day Monte Carson had fetched her to the house.

A small, red-pigtailed girl with a tear-stained freckled face. In a soiled torn gingham dress, barefooted.

"Her name is Shirley and she'll be your kid sister, Jimmy. It will be your job to look after her from here on. . . ."

Jimmy felt sick inside now with the memory of it. A hell of a job of big-brothering he'd done. Going hog wild with jealousy every time a man looked sideways at her. Killing Jerry Cranston. Tearing into that big curly-haired millionaire dude cowboy.

Jimmy took hold of her left hand. His voice had a harsh, husky sound. He had to fight back all the emotions that were tearing him like claws.

"I'll get it back for you, kid, if that's what you want. Then take him away from here, pronto. I don't want him underfoot when the goin' gits rough and fast."

Shirley took hold of Jimmy Dunn's hand and rubbed the calloused palm across her cheeks where a tear had wet it and then she pressed her lips down hard against the rough skin. Jimmy jerked his hand away, suddenly embarrassed and bewildered and ashamed.

"Ride close herd on her, Deacon." Jimmy Dunn swung up into the saddle. And he rode out of the barn and out into the graying dawn.

He couldn't trust himself to stay there any longer. He had to get away from her before he said or did something wrong. He'd already talked out of turn. Telling her he'd get her back that damned ring that cost more money than a forty-a-month cowhand would see in a lifetime. Giving her back her big, loud-mouthed curly purty dude cowboy. He'd said it to make her feel like she was selling out cheap. If a million dollars were cheap. Then she'd turned it into something else. Something he couldn't savvy. Jimmy lifted his horse to a lope. He rubbed his calloused hand along the faded, dirt-grimed blue denim levi pants where the cloth tightened across his saddle-muscled thigh. He felt shaky.

"Another minute and I'd a forgot. I'd a grabbed her and kissed her. Whew! Whisk-

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ers . . . stinkin' of convict sweat. What the hell's eatin' your guts out, you two-bit, lousy tramp? One minute you git big-hearted and you hand her back to the big dude. Next second you'd take her back if she'd pity you enough to slough off a million bucks to ride the grub line with a range tramp on the dodge. You're locoed, Jimmy, locoed as hell!"

Back at the big barn, the Deacon held Shirley and she let the tears come and when the sobbing no longer racked her and her face came away from his shoulder, the Deacon took a spotless white Irish linen handkerchief from the breast pocket of his coat and handed it to her.

"We can be thankful," there was a hidden chuckle in his voice, "that Jimmy Dunn ain't twins."

CHAPTER FOUR

JD Connected

LOG buildings and pole corrals. Giant cottonwoods and tall willows and the smell of wild roses and river mud. Jimmy Dunn rode up at sunrise. And sat his horse there while half a dozen grizzled cowhands quit their chores to stare at him from under slanted hatbrims.

"I was told," Jimmy Dunn got the most out of their cold-eyed suspicion, "that you was short-handed here."

"Somebody lied."

Jimmy Dunn lifted his head and sniffed loudly, looking around. They glared at him.

"I was told," he said, "it was a sheep outfit. But I can't smell no woollies. Can't hear 'em blattin'. Can't see no sheephooks layin' around."

One of the grizzled old cowhands limped towards him on stiff, saddle-warped legs. He stopped long enough to pick up an old wagon spoke and then came on.

"Smart aleck, grubline ridin' son! I'll knock him off. You boys tromp his guts out."

Then he got as far as the horse's withers and the faded blue eyes lighted up and he dropped the wagon spoke and his leathery face broke into a wide grin.

"Well I'll be damned!" he said.

The others came up. All of them with that same stiff-legged gait that marks the old time cowpuncher who won't admit he's no longer a top hand till he's dead and planted deep. It was sort of comical the way they tried to hide their emotions under the tough crust of indifference. There wasn't any glad handshaking or backslapping or demonstration. But it showed in their puckered eyes and the way they grinned. And it thawed and melted away the hard aching lump inside Jimmy Dunn's heart.

These cowpunchers were his own kind. They asked him no questions. Right or wrong they would go through hell for him. He belonged to their breed of man. Spoke their language. Savvied the things they left unsaid.

Over at the bunkhouse there was a tarp-covered round-up bedroll. It had Jimmy Dunn's JD connected brand daubed on it and the long years had weathered and dimmed it. It was rolled up and tied with an old bedrope and it lay on an empty bunk. Inside was a filled warsack. Clean shirts and underwear and socks and shaving gear and odds and ends. Just as he had left it when he rode away from his JD outfit near Miles City after he'd shot and killed Jerry Cranston there on the main street and quit the country on the dodge while these same tough old cowhands held off the sheriff and his law posse, to give Jimmy a head start. And they had fetched his bed and saved a bunk here for him and one of them said his string of cow ponies had shore put on the taller while he was gone.

A hot bath and a shave and one of them gave him a haircut. He'd dug up a new pair of shopmade boots and a new pair of levis. A clean flannel shirt and there was a Five X beaver Stetson in the bunkhouse that had been left there by Monte Carson. Squatted on his hunkers in the shade of the barn, Jimmy Dunn swapped yarns with these old rannyhans. He could talk to them as he could never talk to other men. Not even to the Deacon. And he had them chuckling and shaking their grizzled heads while he told them how he had pokered that dude rancher out of his outfit down on the Mexican Border.

"The sheriff down yonder told me," grinned Jimmy, "that I done the Border feller a favor takin' the spread off his hands. It was losin' him money, the way he run it. I didn't want his henyard layout. But when he said I cold-decked him out of it, it rubbed me the wrong way. Even then I left 'im with no more than a fair to middlin' workin' over. He squawled like a bull calf at a brandin' fire. When he swore out a warrant the sheriff had to serve it. I coulda rode back acrost the Border but I was done with runnin' from the Law. I had money to pay the fine, but the judge had one of them Monday mornin' headaches and he throwed the book at me. The border cowman had pressured him some. It was strictly Law an' Order.

"Eleven months and twenty-eight days on the road gang. But the grub was good. And it kept a man out doors. I coulda lazed and roundsided in the shade more like the Mexicans work out their stretch. But it looked like a good chance to harden up into shape. I'll drop the sheriff down yonder a line to let him know I'll be comin' back some day. He's an

old cowman and savvies. I wouldn't want him to think I'd rabbit on him."

Jimmy Dunn told them about his run-in with the big dude cowboy who owned the Anchor outfit. About Jerry Cranston's brother Arch Cranston.

"What's the set-up there?" he asked.

They told him. It didn't take long. Whitney Howell had more money than brains, according to the way they looked at him. He figured his money could buy him anything he took a fancy to. He wanted to be called a cattle king. So he bought a lot of land and cattle. Jerry and Arch Cranston had handled the deal. Jerry Cranston had crooked the millionaire dude cowboy on the land. And Arch Cranston had 'counted the cattle around the hill half a dozen times. Whitney Howell III. had paid for ten times the amount of cattle he actually owned. And with Arch Cranston ramrodding the outfit, he was stealing the Anchor outfit blind. And he kept Whit Howell pickled in forty rod whiskey and ribbed the big dude cowboy into thinking he was a spur jingling tough hombre. Arch Cranston fed his millionaire boss on a wild west diet and Whit Howell was playing it up to the hilt.

"Arch Cranston has that big overgrowed dude cowboy paintin' the town of Prairie a shore gaudy red. Ridin' up and down the street shootin' out the lights and ridin' into the saloons and shootin' the bottles and glasses off the back-bar. Just raisin' hell. The town marshal quits town till it's over and the dust settled. Whit Howell pays the damages. And them saloon keepers ain't slow to ketch on. Hell, he's paid 'em enough to buy their damned places ten times over. They shore hang it on 'im and he don't seem to ketch on or else he don't give a hoot as long as he kin play cattle king. Money's got no value to him. He pays his way as he goes along. And he's got his silver-mounted spurs let out to the town-hole an' drags 'em noisy.

"ONLY place he ain't shot up is Monte's. Monte Carson told him not to make the mistake of ridin' into his place an' shootin' it up. And it shore hurt that millionaire cowboy's pride. He couldn't buy Monte Carson off like he'd bought off every saloon keeper at Prairie. That griped him bad. And Whitney Howell the Third ain't used to havin' no two-bit gamblin' man an' saloon keeper tellin' him what he can't do. And Arch Cranston figgered it was up to him to see that his millionaire baby got his stick of candy. Arch Cranston kept that promise.

"Arch Cranston taken LaGrange in on the deal. They waited till Monte Carson got on one of his drunks. LaGrange sent Arch Cranston word that the sign was right. And the night of the Fourth when the Anchor outfit was in town celebratin' they pulled it off. Whitney Howell the Third and half a dozen of his over-paid tough cowhands rode into Monte's and held it up. Wild west style. But they didn't do no shootin'. . . . The Deacon walked out alone. He had taken off them magnifyin' glasses he calls his 'readers' and he told them masked men to help theirselves to what they wanted and then git out. But he'd personally kill the first man of 'em that fired a gun off.

"There's a lady in the house!" the Deacon told the big masked gent who was ramroddin' this wild west hold-up. 'Respect her.' "

"That kinda taken the sap outa the big masked bandit. And there was a look in the Deacon's eyes that put fear into their guts. They grabbed what money was in sight and rode out. And all the time they was in there the Deacon's hands was on the gun he packs in a shoulder holster. And his eyes watched LaGrange. And if any of them drunk Anchor tough hands had fired off a six-shooter even by accident, the Deacon would have shot LaGrange out his high lookout chair. That's the real story of the hold-up at Monte's the night of the Fourth of July."

They dropped it there and waited for Jimmy Dunn to take it up. Jimmy turned it over in his mind a while. When he spoke his voice was quiet.

"Was Arch Cranston with 'em when they held up the saloon?"

"Not so's anybody could identify him. Arch Cranston was in town. But he didn't help hold up Monte's saloon."

"Somebody could have gone down the street to where Monte Carson lived!" Jimmy Dunn's voice was very quiet. "And while the excitement held all the attention, that man could have gotten into the house and murdered Monte Carson where he lay dead drunk in bed."

"That's it, Jimmy. That's the way the job was done."

"It could have bin Arch Cranston."

"Yep."

"Bound to be Arch Cranston." They seemed agreed on it.

And that was that. The silence that came now wasn't the easy silence they knew so well how to share. There was an uneasiness underneath it.

"When was it," Jimmy Dunn did his best to make his voice sound casual when he asked the question they knew he was bound to ask, "that Shirley Carson decided to marry this Whitney Howell the Third?"

"The day after Monte Carson's funeral. Biggest funeral ever held at Prairie. Whit Howell bought all the flowers they had at Helena and Butte and Great Falls and had

'em shipped fast express. A wagon load. He was there at the funeral. Sober for the first time in the four-five years he's bin spendin' part of his time at his Anchor ranch. Cold sober and wearin' town duds. Black boot and a black hat and a dark suit like the Deacon always wears.

"He was alone and he stayed as close to Shirley as she'd let him and the girl was too doggoned bogged down in sorrow to care one way or another. She stayed close to the Deacon and this big Whit Howell stayed close to her. And the next day she was wearin' that ring with the big diamond and a green emerald and the Deacon said she was goin' to marry Whitney Howell the Third.

"She didn't look happy about it. Monte Carson was the only daddy she ever had. And she taken it harder than she'd let anybody know. She'd had the Deacon try to locate you. She held up Monte's funeral as long as she could till the Deacon got a wire from the sheriff in Arizona sayin' you'd broke away from the prison camp and they figgered you'd headed into Mexico. So we buried Monte Carson. And Shirley sold the saloon to LaGrange and the Deacon said she'd be marryin' Whitney Howell before long.

"But she kept on dealin' at Monte's. And every day she'd ride here a-horseback and she'd ask us if Jimmy Dunn had showed up. And if you did show up to hold you here if we had to knock you in the head. Because they was goin' to lynch you if you showed up at Prairie. She kept pullin' off that fancy ring like it was burnin' her finger. Like she wanted to throw it away. Then she'd shove it back on her finger again. And when she smiled like she always done when she'd set around augerin' with us old cut-backs, the smile was pitiful. And her eyes was as hard shinin' green as that damn' emerald stone in her ring.

"It's somethin' you'll have to figger out for yourself, Jimmy. You and the Shirley young 'un growed up together. But a blind man kin see that she's packin' a load of grief and worry that's too big and heavy for one small girl to pack alone. I walked in on her the other evenin'. She was in the bunkhouse and she had her arms around that bedroll of yourn and she was cryin' soft, like a little lone kid would bawl. And even when she was hock high to her first pony, that young 'un didn't bawl easy.

"I slipped out before she sighted me, and she was smilin' when she showed up at the barn to git her horse and ride back to town. But it was the kind of smile that makes a man turn his head away unless you like to look at somethin' that's bin hurt bad. Well, that's it, Jimmy. I ain't talked this much in all my life." The crippled old cowpuncher who had acted as spokesman got to his feet and hitched up the sagging cartridge belt with its holstered six-shooter.

CHAPTER FIVE

Devil's Chore

JIMMY DUNN was the boss here now and the half dozen old cowhands, each and every one of them tough as a boot, were waiting for orders. And they wanted them to be fighting orders.

Jimmy nodded. He had been squatting on his bootheels, whittling long thin shavings from a big soft pine chunk of box wood. He had a pile of shavings on the ground and the stick whittled down to the size of a toothpick. He snapped the blade of his jack-knife shut and dusted shavings off his lap and got to his feet.

"I'll be ridin' back to Prairie this evenin' after sundown," he said. "I think I'll take on a little sleep till then. I'm kinda behind on my shut-eye."

He had aired his blankets and soogans in the sun. He spread his bed now on his bunk and undressed and stretched out. For a little while he lay there thinking. A faint grin twisted his mouth. His eyes were hard and cold. Then exhaustion claimed him and he slept soundly till the sun went down.

Then Jimmy Dunn came awake with a sudden start. He had his gun in his hand before his eyes blinked and the tarp and blankets thrown back and he was out of the bunk and standing naked and crouched, his gun pointed at the bunkhouse door when it opened.

It was the Chinaman Happy Day. His black sateen blouse and baggy pants dust powdered from the only horseback ride he'd ever taken. He was excited and his high pitched singsong voice was what had roused Jimmy from the first decent sleep in a bed he'd had since he quit the Arizona prison camp.

Happy Day shuffled in. He was stiffened and lame and the sweat ran down his face through a smear of dirt and blood and his clothes were torn and dirt smeared and he looked like he'd been handled roughly.

"Heap trouble, Mista Jimmy! Cowboy in town. Makee yippy. Laise hell. Buck horse down the stleet. Shoot window. Shoot dishes. Shoot saloons. Laise hell. Talkee too much hang Chinaman. Hang Jimmy Dunn. Lun town marshal off. Him too much labbit. Shoot Deacon. Miss Shi'ley send this. Say givee Jimmy Dunn. Jimmy Dunn heap savvy. Jimmy Dunn come chop-chop."

Happy Day slid a playing card from his blouse. It was blood-spattered. It was the ace of spades and it had the same minutely checked back as the ace of spades Jimmy Dunn

had gotten in the long delayed envelope that had finally caught up with him at the prison road camp.

"Miss Shi'ley takee from Deacon's wallet. Deacon shot."

"The Deacon's dead?" Jimmy was pulling on his clothes.

"Not dead. Die bimeby mebby. Miss Shi'ley nu'se Deacon. She say givee Jimmy Dunn ace of spades. You savvy."

The grizzled cowpunchers were saddled and ready to go. They all had six-shooters buckled on and carbines in their saddle scabbards. A fresh horse saddled for Jimmy Dunn.

"Who shot the Deacon?" Jimmy buckled on his six-shooter.

"LaGrange shoot Deacon."

IT WAS a twenty-mile ride to town. Jimmy Dunn and his half dozen tough old cowhands rode it in faster time than it had ever been covered by men on horseback. But when they neared the little cowtown of Prairie, and sighted the blobs of lights and heard the intermittent crackle of gunfire and the wild yells of drunken cowpunchers riding up and down the moonlit street, Jimmy Dunn reined his sweat-marked, leg-weary horse to a halt.

"All my life," he grinned flatly, "I bin blunderin' headlong into trouble. It's time I used my head for somethin' besides buttin' into stone walls."

Jimmy Dunn was ramrodding the outfit. But they were all gray, grizzled tough old cowpunchers who had survived many a wild ruckus and they knew how to tackle the job without being told. And he checked it to them.

LaGrange was the man behind the whole dirty game. Jimmy knew that now. On the ride here he had time to think it out and had remembered what the Deacon had said. That he couldn't see the forest for the trees. And he had meant LaGrange. The yellow-eyed gambler with the skunk stripe down his sleek black head. LaGrange wasn't any cheap tinhorn. He was about the smoothest, slickest gambler who had ever slipped into the cow country. A square gambler when honest gambling was the game that payed in the long run. And while he dealt for Monte Carson he had to be on the level because Monte had always been square and honest. But deep inside LaGrange was crooked. And when he played for big stakes he did not lose. And if he couldn't win honestly, he dealt 'em from a cold deck.

LaGrange knew men. He studied every man he gambled against. He could pick any man's weak spot. And in his own slick way he attacked there where a man was unguarded and vulnerable.

LaGrange knew Jimmy Dunn like a shrewd scholar knows a book he's studied. And because LaGrange had always hated Jimmy, he had made an extra special job of studying that young cowpuncher. Jimmy Dunn was easy to read as an open book. That's why he'd been a rank failure as a gambler.

LaGrange had ribbed it for Jimmy Dunn to kill Jerry Cranston at Miles City. Jerry Cranston had needed killing. No two ways about it. And Jimmy had no regrets about it. But he could look back now and see where LaGrange had set the stage for that gun duel on the main street of Miles City. LaGrange had dealt 'em. Jerry Cranston and Jimmy Dunn had played the marked cards. And both of them had lost to LaGrange. Jerry Cranston had been killed. Shot down in a fair gun duel. An honest jury would have turned Jimmy Dunn loose with a clear acquittal without leaving the jury box. But that jury had been bought off. LaGrange had used the dead Jerry Cranston's money to buy off the jury. Not even Monte Carson suspected LaGrange when he told Jimmy Dunn that they were railroading him to the pen and that Jimmy's only chance was a jail break and a fast getaway into Mexico. Monte had sprung Jimmy out of jail and gotten him out of Montana.

Monte Carson had known LaGrange for what he was. But Monte would always give the Devil himself his dues. He'd saved LaGrange from lynching once, years ago, when the yellow-eyed gambler had been caught cheating. And Monte figured LaGrange was man enough to be as grateful for that favor as he swore he was forever in Monte Carson's debt.

But LaGrange had murdered Monte Carson. There was no proof. Yet in his heart Jimmy Dunn knew for certain that LaGrange had killed Monte Carson. The Deacon suspected the yellow-eyed gambler. The Deacon was a better gambler than LaGrange. And as honest as the Bible he read.

The Deacon wore a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles he called 'readers'. He didn't need to wear glasses. His eyes were strong and their vision was sharp. But not sharp enough to pick out the minute markings on a deck of cards. But the lenses of his 'readers' magnified the backs of cards as they lay face down on the table. And through those powerful lenses he could read the tiniest marking on a playing card.

The Bible was the Deacon's book, though he belonged to no particular church. On Sundays, if there was a gathering of any denomination, he would attend the services. Camp meetings, the same. If the sky pilot was sincere, the Deacon sat through the sermon. If the preacher was a phony the Deacon quietly walked out. The Deacon never

preached religion to anyone. But he had in his heart and soul a divine faith. A belief in God that was as strong and unswerving as Jimmy Dunn's loyalty to a friend.

The Deacon was ever reluctant to accuse any man. He kept his secrets. He had kept his secret concerning LaGrange too long. And LaGrange had shot him. The Deacon was a fearless man. He packed a gun. But he had never used it to shoot a man. It would take tremendous provocation to prod the Deacon into shooting that short barreled .38 gun he packed in a shoulder holster. LaGrange knew that when he shot the Deacon, when the Deacon had turned over LaGrange's marked hole card. Jimmy Dunn knew that now as if the Deacon had told him the facts.

LaGrange had talked Monte Carson into leaving Miles City after Jerry Cranston had been killed there. LaGrange had persuaded Monte into opening a saloon and gambling house at the little cowtown of Prairie, on the banks of Milk River. Because LaGrange was playing for big stakes. And the big stakes included Whitney Howell III. and his Anchor outfit. And Arch Cranston. LaGrange had used Jerry Cranston till he had no further use for that ruthless, flashy, high stake gambler and blackguard. Then he'd ribbed up the killing of Jerry Cranston. And LaGrange had sent the ace of spades to Jimmy Dunn. So that Jimmy Dunn would rush back in his headlong way to blunder into a gun trap and when the gunsmoke cleared Jimmy Dunn might still be alive but with his neck stuck into a hangman's noose. And Jerry Cranston's tough cowpuncher, cattle rustler brother Arch Cranston would be dead.

But the ace of spades had been delayed. Held over at the Diamond A ranch in Mexico while Jimmy Dunn served out a sentence on the prison road gang. LaGrange must have sweated out those months. Cold sweated them out. Because the Deacon was watching him. And because Monte Carson was getting suspicious of him. Because of the way LaGrange was acting towards Shirley.

"I might have used the ace of spades. . . ." Shirley had said, "used it as a threat. To keep LaGrange in his tinhorn place. . . ."

THAT told another part of the story. LaGrange had his pale yellow eyes on Shirley Carson. When Shirley was ripening into young womanhood, Monte Carson had told LaGrange flatly that if he ever looked sideways at little Shirley, he, Monte Carson, would shoot him down like he'd kill a mad dog. Unless Jimmy Dunn beat him to the job. And Jimmy had been there when Monte Carson told LaGrange. And he'd watched LaGrange and listened while that yellow-eyed gambler lied out of it so slick and smooth that he had fooled both Monte Carson and young Jimmy Dunn into believing Shirley was no more to him than the daughter of the best friend he'd ever had on earth. LaGrange was a smooth talker.

LaGrange was the man Jimmy Dunn had to kill tonight. He would need more than guts and a fast gun if he wanted to get the job done.

"I'm killin' LaGrange," Jimmy Dunn told the half dozen tough old cowpunchers who were backing his play. "Your job is to keep Arch Cranston off my back till I git it done."

That meant keeping Arch Cranston's Anchor tough cowhands back. They knew that.

"What about this big curly headed Whit Howell?" asked one of them.

"Trip him up! Front-foot him and hogtie him." Jimmy Dunn grinned. "After all, he's a shorthorn. He ain't harmful but he might git underfoot. Gosh sakes, don't kill a million dollars, boys."

They rode into town quietly and unnoticed. Jimmy rode alone. The others split into pairs. They unsaddled their played-out horses and turned them loose in the feed yard. Jimmy told them to keep off the main street. Travel in pairs. And wait outside Monte's saloon till he showed up. It might be half an hour or even longer. He wanted to see the Deacon and Shirley. They'd be at Monte Carson's house, Happy Day said. And Monte's house was the only brick house in town. It stood alone and at this end of the street a couple of hundred yards from the feed and livery barn.

They wanted to go along with him. They argued that Jimmy might be walking right into a gun trap.

"I don't figure it that way, boys. LaGrange is gamblin' on my chargin' in headlong. He'll be waitin' for me at Monte's saloon. Arch Cranston will be there with LaGrange. Arch Cranston and his tough Anchor men. That's where the ruckus will be. You fellers keep outa sight. You'll know what to do and how to git it done, when you see me walk in there."

Jimmy Dunn went alone. He kept to the shadows. Lights in the little brick house showed dimly behind tightly drawn window-blinds. He stepped up on the porch and knocked on the door. His hand was on his six-shooter.

The door opened abruptly before he'd finished rapping. The hallway was dark. Jimmy Dunn was skylighted against the moonlight. Jimmy couldn't see who stood there in the small dark hallway. A voice came out of the pitch blackness.

"Who are you?"

"Jimmy Dunn. Who are you?"

"Whitney Howell the Third. The Millionaire Baby. The prize tenderfoot of the

cow country. What friends I have left call me Whit. Come in, Jimmy. But don't come in fighting. . . ."

The voice sounded sober. There was a faint chuckle in it. No smell of booze. Only the sweetish odor of chloroform and antiseptic.

JIMMY DUNN stepped in and the door closed and then the inside hall door opened and let the lamplight in. Whitney Howell was holding the door open. He had on a white shirt that had been spotless until it had been stained with blood. His sleeves were rolled up above the elbows and his forearms were muscular and his hands and arms scrubbed and smelling of strong antiseptic. His curly blonde hair was hidden under an improvised skull cap made from a clean pillowcase. His face bore the marks of Jimmy's fist. His nose, swollen under a pad of white gauze, was taped down with adhesive.

"I got the bullet out of the Deacon's back. Unless complications set in, he's got better than a fifty-fifty chance. I've just changed the dressing and the wound looks clean. Shirley makes a good nurse."

"You talk like a doctor." Jimmy Dunn was bewildered. There was a twinkle in the big dude's eyes.

"John Hopkins. My father was old-fashioned. He held the belief that even a Millionaire Baby should learn a trade. I'd doctored a few horses. I told the Deacon I was a good veterinary. He said a good vet would do. He'd gamble on it. I was more scared than he was. We both came out damned lucky." He held out a strong hand and grinned.

"I was inter-collegiate heavyweight champ. You pack a sweet wallop in both mitts, Jimmy. And thanks. They'll quit calling me Purty Whit around these parts."

Shirley came out of the kitchen. She saw Jimmy Dunn and the color came into her face and she walked over to him and pulled his head down and kissed him hard. It was the first time she had ever kissed him and it made him feel weak-kneed. His face felt hot and he knew he looked like some awkward schoolboy but before he could get mad about being made to look like a damned fool Shirley had a grip on his hand and was heading him into the bedroom where the Deacon was propped up against big white pillows.

"I got him, Deacon. I guarantee he won't get away. Knock him down, Whit, if he tries to stampede." She reached up and took off Jimmy's hat and tossed it aside.

"You don't wear a hat at your own wedding, Jimmy."

The Deacon had his Bible open. A faint smile softened his face.

"It's partly my idea, Jimmy. But it wouldn't be worth much without Shirley's cooperation. It's something Monte Carson always hoped for. I promised him years ago I'd do my part. Whit will be your best man. I'll have to take Monte's place and give away the bride. You got the ring, Doc?"

Whit Howell nodded. It was a plain gold wedding ring. It had been Shirley's mother's wedding ring. Her mother and father had been killed in a train wreck. When Monte Carson adopted their orphaned child he had taken the wedding ring from her dead mother's finger.

Jimmy Dunn was in a sort of daze. Whit Howell yanked off the white skull cap and rolled down his sleeves. He looked like a lot of man right now. He grinned and said something about getting the bridegroom's consent. Shirley said they didn't need it. That Jimmy Dunn wouldn't give it because he was muleheaded. That this was a shanghai job. And for the Deacon to get on with it while Jimmy was still too dazed to savvy what was happening to him.

"This is for keeps, Jimmy." Her eyes were green stars. "Forever and ever and for keeps."

A lump stuck in Jimmy Dunn's throat. He nodded. "For keeps."

The Deacon never wore his readers when he read his Bible. He said there wasn't any crook's markings in God's Book that needed reading.

There was something almighty solemn about that strange little wedding ceremony. In the tone of the Deacon's voice. And the look in Shirley's eyes. And the tightness that pinched the heart of Jimmy Dunn. They were thinking of Monte Carson and it seemed, even to Whit Howell, that Monte Carson was here in the room with them.

Then it was over with and Jimmy Dunn kissed his bride. For the first time he held the girl he had always loved in his arms and he kissed her with a strange mixture of tenderness and fierce possession. And her arms were tight around his neck.

"Jimmy. Jimmy. Jimmy! It's always been like this. You. Nobody else on earth. . . ."

Then Shirley bent down and kissed the Deacon. And Whit Howell kissed the bride. He took the handsome square-cut diamond and emerald ring from his pocket and handed it to Shirley.

"Keep it for me. You know where to send it in case I don't get back."

"You'll be back, Whit. And she'll be waiting for you back East when you take it to her. And I'll thank her in a note for the loan of the ring."

It was all a puzzle to Jimmy.

Whit Howell explained it. "It was a sort

of bluff, Jimmy. To protect Shirley from LaGrange. It kept him away from her. The ring that my fiancee handed back to a drunken, spoiled, no-good million dollar tramp. I'm taking it back to her. When I'm finished with something I have to do here at Prairie. And it's about time I was getting at it. Traveling my way, Jimmy?"

Whit Howell had walked over to where his fancy cartridge belt and carved holster and silver mounted pearl handled six-shooter lay on a chair with his hat. And he buckled on his gun and pulled on his ten gallon hat.

"My final fling," he grinned mirthlessly, "as a wild and woolly cowboy. I'm headed for Monte's. To take what he's stolen from me out of Arch Cranston's tough hide."

Jimmy took the ace of spades from his pocket. He looked at Shirley and she nodded and then Jimmy saw the Deacon putting on his readers.

The Deacon took the ace of spades. "The readers," he said in his flat tone gambler's voice, "bring out the minute markings that nobody but LaGrange used when he marked a deck of cards. That's how I knew the ace of spades you got, Jimmy, was from LaGrange's deck. When I showed it to him last night, he shot me with a derringer he had palmed in his other hand."

He handed Jimmy Dunn the card. "Good luck, son."

"I'll be waiting for you, Jimmy." Shirley kissed him. "You too, Whit." She gave him her hand.

Shirley let them out the front door and barred it when they were gone. She went back into the bedroom. And knelt down.

"I've never asked God for anything, Deacon. Until now."

The Deacon put his hand on the heavy dark red hair and smoothed it. He read aloud in a soft voice from the only Book he knew.

CHAPTER SIX

Burying Ground Rendezvous

JIMMY DUNN walked alongside big Whit Howell. They walked down the main street where drunken Anchor cowpunchers were riding back and forth. When they sighted Whit Howell they rode up and he nodded and motioned with his hand and they rode out of sight and out of town.

"When the time came," Whit Howell said to Jimmy Dunn, "I bought his renegades away from Arch Cranston. Men of that caliber have a price. We're setting Arch Cranston plumb afoot for gun slingers. And LaGrange will be strictly on his own and nobody backing him, when you go in after him. Millionaire money has its value at odd times."

By the time they reached Monte's place the street was deserted. Jimmy Dunn's grizzled cowhands moved in the dark shadows. Jimmy told them briefly that the Anchor tough hands had coyoted.

Monte's saloon had emptied mysteriously. One by one the Anchor men had drifted out. The bouncers had gone out and not come back. Then the bartender had stepped out the back door and had not returned. His apron lay on the bar where he had left it. The extra dealers had walked away from their deserted gambling tables and gone out for air and had not come back.

LaGrange and Arch Cranston stood at the bar, each with a filled shot glass of whiskey. They were puzzled and suspicious and fear and dread chilled their guts.

"Somethin's goin' on, LaGrange." Arch Cranston had his hand on his gun. "I don't like the looks of it. I never trusted you, tinhorn. I've always had a notion you got my brother Jerry killed. If this is one of your tinhorn games, fill your hand with a gun and we'll shoot it out for the jackpot. And the girl throwed in for boot."

"Those are your Anchor renegades, Arch. Under your orders. In your pay. They're supposed to lynch Jimmy Dunn when he rides into town. What the hell goes on?"

Arch Cranston did not know there was a gun palmed in the gambler's hand till the little double-barreled .44 derringer pistol jabbed his ribs.

The swinging half-doors at the front of the saloon parted and Whit Howell strode in. His ten gallon hat slanted to shade a pair of hard cold blue eyes.

Arch Cranston was facing the door. "The Millionaire Baby. Better swap that sneak pop-gun for somethin' that'll kill big game, tinhorn. It looks like the dude cowboy's on the prod."

Jimmy Dunn came in through the back door, his gun in his hand. It was the same six-shooter the Chinaman Happy Day had given him. And he held it in a deceptively careless grip.

"It's showdown, LaGrange." There was a twisted grin on Jimmy Dunn's face. His eyes slivers of cold steel. "Play your marked cards. Here's my ace in the hole."

He had the ace of spades in his left hand. It sailed through the air in a flat spin and its edge struck the bridge of LaGrange's hawk-beaked nose. Just as the yellow-eyed gambler let go the small derringer pistol and it slid out of sight up his sleeve, drawn by the long elastic band that held it up out of sight inside his coat sleeve. And LaGrange filled his hand with a Colt .45.

Both Arch Cranston and LaGrange had the same notion. To use the other for a human

shield. Both saw the other's intention and side-stepped. And now they stood apart for a second as they jerked their guns. Then their gun-fighter instinct shifted them and they stood back to back as their guns spat flame. But the spilt-seconds they lost in their shifting positions, swift as it was, threw the advantage to Whit Howell and Jimmy Dunn. And Jimmy and the big dude cowman both fired at the same instant and they shot to kill and did not miss. And they kept on shooting. While Arch Cranston and LaGrange stood back to back and their guns kept spewing fire but their legs were giving way and their backs were sagging and the heavy .45 slugs from the guns of Jimmy Dunn and Whit Howell kept thudding into their guts and bellies and Arch Cranston and LaGrange were going down, dying on their feet as they went. LaGrange wore no hat and his head with the skunk stripe down the sleek black hair sagged forward and lobbed sideways and the gun slid from his hand and he went down and Arch Cranston toppled over on top of him and they were both dead when the last crashing gun echoes faded into a deathly silence.

"You kin come in now, boys!" Jimmy Dunn's voice sounded. "The drinks are on the house."

FEAR and the first .45 slug from Jimmy's gun that had gut shot LaGrange had spoiled the gambler's aim and Jimmy Dunn stood there without a bullet nick to show for the scrap. Jimmy looked through the haze of gunpowder smoke and across the two dead men. He thought Whit Howell was wounded the way he stood there with the color drained from his sunburnt face. The big dude cattleman looked sick enough to keel over.

"Where you hit?" Jimmy Dunn didn't feel too robust himself.

Whit Howell was unbuckling his cartridge belt with its carved holster. He shoved the pearl handled silver mounted six-shooter into the holster and shoved the cartridge belt and holstered gun at the grizzled cowpunchers who came in through the front and back doors.

"Here." Whit Howell's voice sounded queer. He shoved the belt and gun into the hands of the nearest old cowhand. "Keep it."

He walked outside and sat down on the plank walk and began to vomit.

"Take care of 'em," Jimmy Dunn pointed to the bullet riddled dead bodies of LaGrange and Arch Cranston, "before you commence your town drinkin'. Then the town of Prairie is all yourn."

Jimmy Dunn re-loaded his empty gun and shoved it into the waistband of his clean levis. Then he walked out and sat down beside Whit Howell. Whit was through being sick and he grinned faintly while he washed up at the pump that fed water into a big horse trough. He, too, had come out of the gun ruckus unhurt. He said he had a bellyful of playing cowboy.

"I don't want to shove something down your throat, Jimmy. You're touchy as hell and some of it is false pride but we won't argue it. I'm pulling out for what you call Back East. On the next Eastbound. I'm going back to marry the girl who told me she wouldn't have me till I grew too big for my Millionaire Baby diapers. I'm not coming back. The Anchor is yours. Yours and Shirley's. Wed-

Dusty could reckon with any man alive, on his own powdersmoke terms, but when it came to a woman —and a howling hell-cat from the far forks of Bitter Creek, at that—he was stymied. He stood to lose the best friend he ever had—to say nothing of the sprawling, fabulous Hat Ranch he had worked and sweated for, in his

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ding present. You licked me once. But you can't do it now. And if you go prideful on me now I'm going to wipe up the main street of Prairie with you and drag you back to your bride. You going to take the Anchor or will I have to cram it down your throat with a pair of dukes?" Whit Howell's fists doubled. He meant it.

"What do you aim to do when you get back East?" asked Jimmy Dunn.

"Go back to Johns Hopkins. Work there as an interne till I learn enough about medicine and surgery to go into practice for myself."

"Then thanks," Jimmy Dunn shoved out his hand, "for the Anchor, *Doc.*"

Jimmy said he'd figured out later how he could ramrod a big outfit like the Anchor from a prison cell.

Whit Howell said this was another time when millionaire money talked. If that was the only language the law court savvied. But with the Deacon and Shirley giving testimony it was a cinch Jimmy Dunn would be cleared of the murder charge against him. He had killed Jerry Cranston in self-defense. The jury would acquit him without leaving their jury box. As for what few weeks remained of his road gang sentence, he could square it without going back there. A telegram to the sheriff would fix it. And Whit Howell wrote out the longest telegram that had ever gone over the wire out of Prairie, Montana. They got a reply later that night. One of Jimmy Dunn's cowhands fetched it over to the brick house where Jimmy Dunn and Whit Howell and Shirley sat talking in the Deacon's room till train time.

The sheriff's telegram was short. It said: "Stay up yonder in Montana where you belong. Ramrod your Anchor outfit. A good cowhand like you is plumb wasted swinging a pick and shovel. I'd hate to see your horns sawed down to the nubbin but I got a notion that little missus of yourn will keep you from straying. Good luck to you both."

Whit Howell had sent another wire. To Miles City. And he got a reply while he and Jimmy Dunn and Shirley were at the railroad station waiting for the Eastbound train.

The wire was signed by the sheriff and the judge. It read: "The case against Jimmy Dunn is closed. The killing of Jerry Cranston was done in self-defense. Jimmy Dunn is tried. And acquitted. Jimmy Dunn is to be congratulated. Shirley is just about our favorite lady here at Miles City. And she did all right for herself when she married Jimmy Dunn. We'd be proud to welcome them both back to Miles City. Best regards to the Deacon. And the same to you, sir. You call yourself a dude but from the way you side Jimmy Dunn it looks to us like you will do to take along."

The grizzled cowhands who gathered to give Whit Howell a proper sendoff were a little tipsy. As the Eastbound pulled in they emptied their guns at the stars. Whit Howell's private car was coupled onto the Eastbound. Jim Hill owned this railroad. He had given Whitney Howell III the private car as a gift. The conductor and brakeman had their blue uniforms dusted off and their brass buttons polished. The shooting had them nervous. But when they'd gotten their train orders they sought out Whitney Howell III. to ask him if there was anything they could do for him.

The brakeman did not recognize Jimmy Dunny. Jimmy grinned.

"Remember me?"

The brakeman's face paled a little. Fear came into his eyes. Jimmy grinned and held out his hand.

"No hard feelin's, mister."

The brakeman had looked around for the town marshal. One of Jimmy Dunn's grizzled cowhands was wearing that law badge. The town marshal had turned it in and ridden away from Prairie, to quit Montana along with the Anchor tough renegades who were drifting to a new range. Prairie had a new town marshal and he stood near Jimmy Dunn.

The brakeman looked into Jimmy Dunn's gray eyes. And read nothing but good natured friendliness there. He shook hands.

The train got under way. Whitney Howell, no longer wearing any of his dude cowboy duds, looked very much like a man and the doctor he was going to be as he stood on the rear platform of his private car and waved.

Jimmy Dunn and Shirley stood there on the wide plank platform. Jimmy had his arm around the shoulders of his bride. They watched the Eastbound until it was out of sight. The whistle of the locomotive sounded in the starlit night. When the train had gone from sight Jimmy Dunn and his bride Shirley walked together to the little burying ground. Before they returned to the house and the Deacon who would from now on run Monte's place as his own, Jimmy and Shirley were paying their first visit to the grave of the man who had been a father to them. Together they knelt at the grave of Monte Carson.

They knelt there in the moonlight. When Shirley's prayer was ended, Jimmy Dunn took a soiled and blood-spattered playing card from his pocket. He shoved it deep into the ground at the headboard marked MONTE CARSON. It was the ace of spades.

Then Jimmy Dunn lifted his bride Shirley to her feet and when he had kissed the tears that were shining in her eyes, and she smiled, they walked away slowly. Into their new life together. Forever and for keeps.

THE END

FRONTIERSMEN WHO MADE HISTORY

from the notebook of CEDRIC·W·WINDAS

ALEXANDER MAJORS

When the complete history of transportation in America shall be written, and due honor paid to the gallant frontiersmen who bossed the wagon trains across the wild lands from Missouri to the far Pacific, the name of Alexander Majors should top the list.

Born in Simpson County, Kentucky, Majors was still a young man when he operated huge bull teams from Independence to Santa Fe. None more ready than he to drop rein for rifle and blast a passage through renegade whites or Indians who challenged his right o' way.

WINDAS 1946

In 1859 he took over a nearly-defunct stage line carrying passengers and mail between St. Joseph, Mo., and Denver, Col. He built it into a profitable concern, though it was a tough route that demanded constant defense of goverment mails (and nervous females) with sawed-off shotguns.

With his partner, Waddel, he established the colorful Pony Express in 1860; dropped a quarter million dollars on the deal. He operated the Overland Stage between Salt Lake, Utah, and Placerville, California. In 1868 he helped lay the first "iron trail" for the Union Pacific. His name will live as the father of American transportation.

Dad said, "Thebrun, if you shoot that kid you'll swing for it!"

MAX THEBRUN had a strong, high-boned face and by the light of the cook's fire on that Shonkin round-up he seemed to be all forehead, cheekbone and jaw.

He was saying, "I guess jail is a good spot for a first-time rustler, now that the country's gone civilized, though I liked her better the way she was. A short drop and a stiff rope —that's good rustler medicine, too."

The boys sprawled there, tense and silent. The only noise came from Happy, the cook, who was rattling around inside the plunder box.

Max Thebrun went on, "But lawbooks be damned, if any ex-convict iron on this round-up turns up with more calves than they got cows, I'll shoot their lights out with my .41 and them cards go as they lie."

His eyes roved the twenty-odd faces around the fire without coming to rest on any of them. He tossed the heel of his coffee into the sage-brush fire and stood up, his cross-weave California pants wrinkled from the saddle and sticking to the insides of his stud-horse legs. His flower-roweled spurs made a tinkling sound as he walked off into the dark.

Archie Thebrun, Max's cousin, sprawled on the ground, one knee up, looking at Tabby McGrath.

Tabby wiped the last of the gravy from his dish with a chunk of dummy and ate it without relish, wishing Archie would stop staring at him.

FIRST CHOICE FOR THE COTTONWOOD PRANCE

By DAN CUSHMAN

Of course Tabby had never been in prison himself. He was only fifteen, though he was big for his age. But his brother, Pat McGrath, had spent a year making hair bridles, and that put the brand on him, too, since they had thrown in together to try to run the Flying W.

Most men didn't come back to the old stomping ground after being penned by the law.

They rode on, and got called by a different handle, and forgot about it, but Pat was different. He'd done a lot of thinking down there, and when they turned him loose he came right back to go straight and do it the hard way.

He moved back to the place on Beaver Creek where his dad went belly up, got together a little herd of she-stuff and resolved

A night message on the Shonkin round-up sent young Tabby McGrath for his bill-of-sale to honesty and manhood, and a chance to call the manner of his death—before he had quite begun to live!

to hang and rattle until the increase made a rancher out of him.

That had been two years back, and now Thebrun was on the prod because Pat's Flying W cattle had been drifting onto the Arrow River Range.

"Take it easy, Tabby," Dad Price said, after the boys had drifted away from the fire to spread their soogins. Dad was sixty or so, with hair that hadn't been roached for six months. He kept fingering that long hair now as he stood looking at Tabby.

"I ain't scared of him!" Tabby said, almost bawling now that he'd got a little sympathy.

"Just halter yourself, son, and ride with a short hold. Nobody thinks you're scared."

"I'm not scared," muttered Tabby, glaring at the place where the two Thebrun boys had rolled their soogins.

Old Dad Price hung around like he wanted to say some more and didn't quite know how.

"Reckon Pat will be around?" he asked.

Pat was riding on the Judith round-up.

"Nope, I'll have to handle this end alone," Tabby answered, trying to make his voice so it didn't sound lonesome.

Then he asked, "Why?"

Dad pondered for a while, looking far away as though he could see something in the dark.

"It's like this, Tabby. Jim Stewart and me were working them draws up near Magpie Springs this mornin' and we jumped a roan cow. She looked like a shorthorn-Texas cross. Peculiar thing about that cow, Tabby, she had your brand on one side, an old Milliron brand on the other. Now the Milliron vents with a big J on the hip, but this cow didn't have no vent. Just the two brands. I talked it over with Jim one way and another, and we sort of forgot to bring her in. She's out there at the springs if you want to backtrail the round-up and take her home."

Tabby remembered the Milliron deal, "She's our cow. We bought her and seven more, off the Milliron last spring."

"Then why didn't Milliron throw a vent on them?"

"Because they drifted across the ice. Pat wrote to Bettenhorn, the Milliron boss, and he said he'd sell the cows for two hundred dollars rather than send his renegade rider all the way across the breaks after 'em. We got the bill-of-sale to prove it. We're runnin' an honest spread—"

"Sure, Tabby. I figured it was somethin' like that."

"Then why didn't you bring the cow in?"

"Because the Thebruns would raise a ruckus."

"Let 'em!"

"Now, Tabby. Remember what I said about tyin' that lip down. It ain't easy to do, and it's a twenty-four hour job. Nobody will think you're a coward because you don't want to tangle with the Thebruns."

THE THEBRUNS were a hard lot. Riders didn't stay with them for long. According to talk, they didn't even like each other. In fact, they hated each other's guts, but they sided when the chips were down.

Tabby rolled up in his soogins, but he couldn't sleep. He kept thinking about the rest of those Milliron cows. They would be sure to show up, and when they did he'd have to face the Thebruns.

After grub pile in the morning Max Thebrun rode over on his big apaloosa horse and sat looking at the McGrath cut of the cows. There weren't many of them—forty, maybe—most of the McGrath cattle were over on the Judith where Pat was riding.

Thebrun moved as though to ride away without speaking, then he drew up, sawing on that mean halfbreed bit he always used.

"Where's the mother of that brindle calf?" he asked.

"I don't know," answered Tabby shortly.

"By God, you'd better know!" Thebrun shouted. He had a furious temper, and it showed on him now. His lips drew down tight and the lids of his eyes kept twitching.

Tabby remembered what Dad Price had said about riding herd on his lip. A couple of Sixty-nine punchers over by a rope corral had stopped work and were listening.

"Who brought that calf in?"

"Nulty."

"What the hell business has Nulty got rounding up mavericks for you? He'll have his hands filled repping for the T-Quarter."

Tabby didn't say anything.

"Why did Nulty cut the calf in with your bunch?"

"Because he found it with some of our stuff."

Nulty, a short, fat-faced man, rode up.

"You talkin' about me?" he asked.

The T-Quarter was a big spread from over the hills, and Thebrun had respect for the brand even though there wasn't much about Nulty to be scared of.

"It's nothing," he said.

Nulty hung around until Thebrun was gone. "Was it that brindle calf?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Better stay clear of him, kid. He's mean. All them Thebruns are. Archie too, even if he is grinnin' all the time. They hate everybody—even themselves. Roll one?" asked Nulty, passing his makin's.

"Thanks," muttered Tabby, trying to twist up a cigarette without trembling.

Tabby couldn't help but worry about what would happen when those other Milliron cattle showed up. He couldn't prove ownership without the Milliron vent, and Pat had the bill-of-sale somewhere at home. Ordinarily, the brand inspector would just run them in with the rusties until the thing was cleared up, but the brand inspector was not here, and when Thebrun saw them he'd be sure to get mean.

Tabby got off by himself that afternoon and practiced drawing the Colt pistol from the holster at his hip, but the big-framed gun was too heavy for him, and he doubted whether he could hit anything with it if he did get it out.

Dad Price once said he'd be better off leaving the gun on his saddle. Dad claimed that a lobo like Thebrun would do anything if he could find the excuse, and Tabby's packing that old six-shooter might be just the excuse he was looking for.

What Dad really meant was that Thebrun might abuse him into going for it, but he didn't exactly say it.

The round-up covered the east foothills and the stock was grazed down toward the big flats overlooking the Missouri river. Nothing had been seen of the Milliron cows, and Tabby got to thinking maybe they'd drifted over into the Judith.

THAT night he rode in from making a short circle with a couple of TX punchers and was just turning his horse back into the cavvy when Thebrun headed over.

Something about the way Thebrun held his bridle, and set back in his saddle like there was hickory in his spine made Tabby feel sick inside.

Thebrun came to a stop, his face big-boned and leathery. "I want to see you a minute," he said to Tabby.

"What do you want?"

"I said I wanted to see you. Come along over here." He jerked his head toward a group of men who was standing near the rope corral which held the Flying W cut of the cows.

Dad Price was there, and Archie Thebrun, and Nulty and a couple more. All of them except Nulty were members of the Shonkin Round-up Association, and were evidently making big medicine.

Tabby was a little scared, but he knew right was siding with him, and when you're young that seems important. "Right always wins in the end," that circuit-riding preacher had said when he dropped in, riding the grubline the winter before, and Tabby believed him. He remembered those words now as he walked in his scuffed choke-bore boots.

"Here he is," said Thebrun, poker faced, swinging down from his big chestnut roping horse.

Nobody paid Tabby more than a glance. They seemed to be uncomfortable. They seemed to feel they ought to do something, but they weren't sure just what.

Dad Price badgered off a chew of tobacco and said, "Hell, Thebrun, you can't prove anything by bringing the kid over here. Or by holdin' a pow-wow with us, neither. This is a job for the brand inspector."

"I've listened to that rabbit talk as long as I intend to, Price, and I'm sick of it. I never wanted to let this Maverick Iron into the association in the first place. The Sixty-Nine didn't either, but you haywire spreads outvoted us."

Dad spoke quietly, "Pat McGrath served his time in Deer Lodge, Thebrun, and he came out wantin' to go straight. I figured he deserved the chance, and most of the others did, too. I can't recollect that the Sixty-Nine was too stirred up about it. In fact, I can't recollect that anybody was stirred up about it except you Thebruns."

A cold, pale fury spread up beneath Max Thebrun's tan, and veins stood out at his temples.

Nulty, moving uncomfortably, cleared his throat. He wanted to change the subject and ease the thing off some way, but he didn't know how.

Dad didn't seem to notice Thebrun's fury. He went on in a drawling voice,

"In fact, I guess there's several of us association members who would be sort of absent today if one slip of the brandin' iron had put us out of business permanent."

The remark was aimed at Thebrun, and it took effect. There had been plenty of talk around a few years back about how the Thebruns had been in trouble with the Musselshell Association for branding too many mavericks.

Fury seemed to freeze Max Thebrun in his tracks. The pupils of his eyes were like pinpoints, and his right hand kept opening and closing just above the butt of his hip-riding .41.

"Max!" called Archie Thebrun.

Archie was a trifle fat, and he always smiled. He smiled even now, in a kind of frozen way.

"Shut up!" said Max.

THE two Thebruns hated each other, that was apparent in their eyes as they looked at each other. It made Tabby feel better, even though he knew Archie hated Pat and his "maverick iron" as much as Max.

Pierce, the Sixty-Nine foreman, spoke up, "Hell, let's cool off. How about those three cows in there, Tabby? That's a damned strange looking business—Milliron on one side, Flying W on the other, and no vent."

With a visible effort, Max Thebrun turned away from Dad Price, "Yes, McGrath, when did you slap your brand on those three Milliron cows?"

"Early this spring."

"Oh, so you admit it!"

"There's the brand. It's plain enough."

"Don't give me any of your lip!" He waited as though he expected Tabby to rear back with something. When that didn't happen, he asked, "Then you admit you rustled them?"

"No! They drifted across the ice on the tail end of that last December blizzard. These and five more. They were on our range not three miles from the house. Pat wrote to Mr. Bettenhorn of the Milliron and told him where they were, but Bettenhorn wrote back saying he'd sell 'em for two hundred bucks."

Thebrun forced a hard smile across his lips, "You're not a very good liar, McGrath. Those are some of Bettenhorn's prize brood stock and you have him selling them for the price of Texas bone-bags."

"He wanted to make it a good deal so we—"

"Just to help a rustler along?"

"No, because he'd have had to send a renegade rider sixty miles after 'em, and bring 'em across ten miles of bad lands and swim the river, that's why. He wanted to make it a good deal so we'd take 'em. He couldn't put his vent brand on to show sale, but he sent Pat a paper that he said would be good enough for the inspector."

"You're a liar!" said Thebrun.

Tabby knew that Thebrun was trying to make him fight—trying to make him go for the six-shooter at his hip. He set his jaw, remembering what Dad had said. It was no disgrace not to fight with a Thebrun.

"You're a damned rustler just like that striped brother of yours."

"You shut up about my brother!"

Thebrun whipped off his glove and slapped Tabby across the teeth with it.

"Don't tell me to shut up!"

He strode after Tabby, cornering him against the corral rope where he slapped him again. He reached behind Tabby with his toe and tripped him so that he fell backward into the cow-pawed dirt.

The boys were getting mad, but none of them wanted to fight with the Thebruns. Nulty said, "Hey, for God's sake—"

Tabby raised up to his knees, trying to blink the dirt out of his eyes. He was sobbing and cursing Max Thebrun. He located the big man standing over him, and his hand went back and found the butt of the old .45. He tried to draw it, but he was sitting on the holster. He jerked the gun out, but Dad kicked it from his fingers.

Thebrun had been waiting for the draw. When the gun came into view, his hand had streaked up from his waist. Now he stood there with his gun drawn.

Dad said, "Thebrun, if you shoot that kid you'll swing for it!"

Thebrun knew it was the truth. He knew everyone in the country feared him—and they hated him, too. He had to draw the first shot to get away with self-defense, and drawing a first shot was dangerous.

Tabby tried to get his hands on his gun, but Dad picked it up and put it in his own belt.

"Get going," Thebrun shouted at Tabby.

"I'll stay right here," Tabby sobbed. "This here's our corral and we're members of the association."

Archie Thebrun said, "Come on, Max. Quit rowing with the kid. Save it up for Pat."

"I said the damn rustlers were out of the association."

"Reckon that takes a vote," drawled Dad, "and I don't see how we can have a vote until meetin' time come winter."

Archie said, "Skelton's coming out tomorrow. With him here, I guess we can take a vote all right."

Skelton was owner of the Sixty-Nine spread, the biggest outfit on the Shonkin.

Max Thebrun mounted his horse. He pointed his finger at Tabby and shouted, "And don't try moving those cows before he gets here!"

THE BOYS sort of forgot about the trouble at supper. They were laughing and spinning yarns, but they shut off in a hurry when Max Thebrun came. Tabby finished his supper and walked off. He noticed somebody following him. He stopped at his warbag and started digging around in it, looking back under his arm. The man following him was Archie Thebrun.

"You could make it easy on yourself by 'fessin' up tomorrow," he said, smiling as usual. "I'll see to it personally they don't do anything to you."

"I got nothin' to confess. Them cows are ours."

"Can you prove it?"

"I could if I was back at the home ranch."

"How?"

"We got a bill-of-sale."

"You know how I stand on this, don't you, Tabby?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Max there, is a pretty rough fellow, even for his pardner. I didn't dare say much. He's ornery right now, but once he sees the papers, he'll get over it."

"But I tell you—"

"How far is it to the home ranch?"

"Twenty miles."

"That big cutting horse of yours could make it easy between now and tomorrow morning."

Tabby thought it over.

"Don't say anything about me talking to you," grinned Archie. "That damned Max would put a bullet right through my guts."

"Sure," said Tabby. "I know."

"Better not mention it to Dad Price either. You know how he is. He thinks you're a baby. He'd try to talk you out of going."

Tabby rolled up in his soogins and lay looking at the stars until everyone around him was snoring. He wondered about Archie Thebrun. Folks said Archie was worse than Max, even, because if Max had it in his mind he'd say it. Archie would smile in your face whether he wanted to make wolf bait of you or not.

But for all that, Archie had tried to pull Max off that afternoon, and there was no way he could benefit much by having Tabby ride away and get the bill-of-sale.

A wind came up, and the stars blotted out. There was some lightning, and a few big drops of rain. Most of the boys rolled deeper in their tarps, but Tabby got out and pulled on his boots.

Jim Ross, a Sixty-Nine rider, reared up on one arm and looked at him.

"Double watch?" he asked.

"I don't know," answered Tabby. "I'm going over and keep an eye on our beef cut."

He didn't go near the Flying W cut. He carried his saddle over to the cavvy. Weston the night wrangler rode up while Tabby was trying to locate his big gray horse.

"What the hell?" asked Weston, "They call you out for guard tonight?"

"Those cows of ours are spooky and I'm scared Max Thebrun will get 'em to running," Tabby lied.

"Aw, hell. Go back to bed. Thebrun's not that ringy. He couldn't get yours to running without stampeding the bunch."

"Anyhow I want my horse."

It was black with dust and spatters of rain coming up on the blow, but Weston cut out the gray gelding and ran him past. Tabby laid his loop on him and tossed the saddle on his back.

He headed up toward the cookwagon whose white top was about the only thing visible in the dark, but when he was sure Weston could no longer see him he struck out across the prairie with the wind at his back, keeping the big gray at a good amble so he'd be back by morning.

Blows with lightning and rain had a habit of coming up a couple times a week, but this one got itself into an ornery mood; an hour before midnight the rain was still coming in little gusts with now and then a streak of hail. The cattle got up, and commenced milling around. They were just off the grass, well fed, and full of run.

Nulty, who was on the first watch, came in and roused Max Thebrun.

"What the hell?" growled Max.

"Those Lazy T longhorns are millin'," he

said. "They'll all be at it if this blow keeps on. It's blacker than a gambler's heart out there and they're plenty spooky. We better get an extra guard."

Max got up and pulled on his boots. He told Nulty who to call, then he went over to the cavvy and picked himself a horse. He rode off, and that was the last they saw of him. Alive, that is.

MORNING came with only a little haze of dust in the air. Alton Rust, a rider for the Sixty-Nine, dragged himself in to grub pile, cussing and shaking the half-hitches from his leg muscles.

"That's the longest damned watch I ever stood," he growled. "Why didn't we get any relief out there?"

"Nobody called time," answered Weston.

They all looked at Nulty. "Don't look at me. I rode in here at eleven o'clock and turned the shebang over to Max Thebrun. If he wanted you boys to ride it out, that's his say. I'm not captain of this round-up. Why, us reps don't have to ride circle at all on the T-Quarter side of the hills."

They sat around, warming their gullets with scalding coffee.

"If the smell of this java don't bring him in nothing will," said Russ. Archie Thebrun sat there, grinning as usual. The cook came out and looked around. "Miller and Tabby gone too?"

"There comes Miller now," Russ remarked. He lowered his tincup and stared through the early haze. "He's on the high lope, too."

Miller pulled in from a stiff gallop with foam dribbling from his horse's bit.

"Somebody killed Max Thebrun," he said.

Nobody said a word, although the first thoughts were the same pretty much all around the circle. Put into words it would be, "The kid must have drygulched him, and it was damned good riddance."

Miller went on, "I came across him about half an hour ago. He'd been dead quite a while. Bullet right between the eyes. Bullet burn on his right arm, too."

Archie Thebrun threw his coffee away and looked around. There was no smile on his face now. His eyes were hard as two pieces of quartz.

"By God they won't get away with this!"

Nobody quite knew who he meant by "they," and it made them uncomfortable. It was like being tied up and having a wolf breathe down your neck.

Dad Price asked, "What do you mean?"

Instead of answering the question, Archie whirled on Dad and asked, "Where's that pistol you took away from that McGrath pup?"

Dad chawed on a salt-pork rind for a while without deciding how to answer Archie Thebrun.

"Did you give it back to him?" asked Archie.

"No."

"Where is it?"

"I imagine you know that as well as I do."

"It's gone?"

"I tossed it with my plunder yesterday evening. When I got up this morning I didn't see it."

"Then he took it!"

"I'd say anybody in this camp could have taken it."

"Weston, you were night hawking that saddle string. Did you see anything of Tabby McGrath?"

Weston didn't care about telling the truth but there was no way he could get out of it.

"He came around about an hour after dark. He said he was scared his beef cut would get spooked and he wanted to ride herd on 'em. So I cut out that big gray gelding of his and he rode away." Then Weston added, "But he didn't have any gun on him."

"He could have cached it." Archie Thebrun stood up, slapping the sixgun butt at his hip as though to give emphasis to the movement. "Nulty, you'd better ride in to town for the sheriff. The rest of us will form a posse and catch him before he gets shut of the country."

Nobody was very anxious to ride with the posse, but there was no way of getting out of it. Nulty took out in the direction of town, and was two miles down the trail by the time all the boys got their saddles on and latigos tight.

"Reckon we won't have no sight of a ride," muttered old Dad Price, squinting across toward the hills.

Tabby McGrath was coming, the big gray making good time.

"Where's your gun?" asked Dad when he rode up.

Tabby looked surprised and didn't answer for a moment. "Why, you took it."

"You didn't come around last night after it?"

"Of course not."

"Stop putting words into the kid's mouth," snarled Archie Thebrun. He whirled on Tabby. "You're going to hang anyhow, so you might as well make a clean breast of it."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You rode away from here last night didn't you?"

"I did what you told me to do. I went up to the shack to find the bill-of-sale for them cows—"

"What *I* told you?"

"You told me to get the bill-of-sale so I wouldn't have any more trouble with Max and you know you did."

Archie laughed. "I can't imagine a more far-fetched story than that!"

It looked that way to most of the other boys, too. A Thebrun was about the last person who would want to save a McGrath's hide.

Dad Price, however, didn't seem to think it was so strange.

"Reckon we all ought to ride out and take a look at Max's body. We might find out somethin'."

THE ENTIRE crew rode to the dry wash where Max Thebrun had been found. He was sprawled on his back, looking at the sky, one foot twisted under him. The bullet which killed him had entered his chest and gone through his back. Wounds like that always bleed a lot, but there was not a drop of blood showing on the dry autumn grass.

"He must have been carried here," said Dad, and the boys agreed. "Gun's gone too."

Dad backtrailed half a mile. He found the place where Thebrun had fallen. There were boot tracks there, and in the middle of a clump of greasewood was Thebrun's gun—a .41 calibre Remington.

In the chamber beneath the hammer was an exploded cartridge. Dad didn't have much more to say until he got back to the camp. He went over and spent some time looking at the cavvy. He came back and asked Archie Thebrun,

"By the way, Archie, where's that big black night horse of yours, the one with the blaze on him?"

Something about the question made Archie jerk. He stood there, his eyes like a weasel's. He rubbed the palms of his hands across the sides of his pants, then he decided to smile.

"I don't know," he answered.

"He ain't out there in the cavvy."

Dad called to Weston, "Where's that black night-herdin' horse of Archie's? The one with the blaze?"

"He was there last night. I recollect, because Jake got his rope on him by mistake."

Dad turned to Archie Thebrun, "Tell 'em about that midnight horse, Archie."

"I don't know what you mean!" barked Archie.

"Then I'll tell 'em. He's out yonder on the prairie. He's dead and he's got two bullet holes in him—one of 'em a .41, from Max's gun, and one of 'em a .45 from Archie's."

Archie moved away, his hand hovering over the butt of his .45. His hand flashed down, and Dad Price shifted aside, drawing as he went. Archie's gun fired first, but he was pushing himself, and the bullet cuffed dirt off at an angle fifty paces away. Dad Price deliberately pulled down and sent a slug tearing through Archie's forearm.

Archie's arm dangled on broken bones, the gun falling at his feet. He went to his knees trying to retrieve it, but Nulty booted it away.

"I wanted to save you, Archie," said Dad quietly. "I wanted to save you for the hangin'!"

It seemed like such an extra occasion that Happy built up the fire with fresh sagebrush stalks and brewed more coffee. Dad then found time to explain,

"Nobody but a scissorbill would think Tabby was the kind to ride out yonder and shoot Max in the dark. When I saw that Max had been drug down the coulee from where he'd been shot, I got to wondering why. When I saw that .41 pistol of his which had one shot gone I wondered all the more. Just on a hunch I took a look at the cavvy. Well, there was Archie's favorite night horse gone and it all fit together.

"Archie sent Tabby away so he'd be suspected. Then he sneaked that black out and went to kill Max. He'd been aiming on killing him for some time, and this seemed like a good chance. He found Max all right and rode up, but Max was suspicious and drew. He wasn't fast enough and Archie got him in the chest, Max's bullet wounding Archie's big black horse.

"That left Archie in a jam. He couldn't come back with a horse packing a .41 slug. So he hauled Max away from the scene, rode the wounded horse over to a drygulch and killed him."

Dad Price grinned and downed the heel of his coffee. "To be a detective, all a man has to do is read the cards backwards."

"Gosh!" said Tabby, looking at him with big eyes.

Tabby fumbled in his pants pocket, "By the way, here's that bill-of-sale. See, it's signed by Bettenhorn and—"

Nulty grinned, "Put it away. There's not a man left around here that suspects you—or your brother either."

TEN THOUSAND LEAGUES IN THE SADDLE

The longest horseback ride on record was commenced in 1926 at Buenos Aires by A. F. Tschiffely, an Argentine school teacher riding two native ponies, *Mancha* and *Gato*. Two-and-a-half years later, having traveled over 10,000 miles, he arrived with the same two horses in Washington, D. C., where he was welcomed by President Calvin Coolidge.

—*Roy Vandergoot*

Tietgen fired through the open end of the holster.

YELLOW HERO

What breed of hombre was this little Sam Johnson, who'd fight with fists, feet, knife or gun?—though his cold, clammy guts told him all the while he was yellow as hell!

By CHARLES HANDLEY

SAM JOHNSON sure was a queer coot. He was scared of his own shadow, but he would fight with fists, feet or six-shooters if anyone crossed his path. I've seen him shiver in his boots an' sneak out the back way of a saloon to avoid a brawl, then come in the front door an' fight like a damned Apache until he got it settled.

Well, sir, Sam an' a newcomer to Jeru by the name of Lars Tietgen had been loanin' money to Joe Perrin on a piece of property where Perrin kept his wife an' nine kids. Suddenly Sam had bought Perrin out to settle the debt an' it was when Perrin was to pay off Tietgen that the trouble started.

"I'm goin' up to the house with you while you serve that eviction notice on Joe Perrin, Nat," Sam told me. "That place is now my property. Lars Tietgen is holed up there with 'em an' I'm goin' to have a showdown."

We was close to the square adobe that housed the Perrins. I could see that Sam was shakin' when he talked. He was a little guy an' danged if'n I could understand why he had wanted to get everyone in the county all riled up against him for evictin' a fellow with nine kids.

"You're goin' to be as popular as a rattlesnake around here if you turn the Perrins out," I said. " 'Course, bein' sheriff, I've got to serve them papers if you say so, but there's no tellin' what it will lead to. Tietgen is a tough hombre an' he's got folks around here to thinkin' you're givin' Joe Perrin a pretty raw deal. Tietgen says he's goin' to stay with the Perrins an' protect 'em."

"You've known me for twenty years, Nat," Sam said. "What do you think about it?"

"I think you're goin' to lose every friend you've got." I was plenty disgusted an' I didn't care if he knew it.

Sam, he just tried to roll a cigarette without success. The tobacco danced all over the paper an' fell to the ground. Finally he crumpled the paper between his thumb and forefinger, gave me a queer look an' hit out for the Perrin 'dobe.

I followed Sam an' heard him call to the house. His voice was dead steady an' there wasn't no sign of him bein' jittery now.

"Joe," he called, "I want you an' Tietgen to come out here. I've got the sheriff an' we're givin' you notice."

Someone inside the house fired a rifle through an open window. The bullet struck the crown of Sam's hat an' sent it off his head.

"In that case I'll come in," Sam said as cool as a cucumber.

"Just a minute!" I yelled. "This is Nat Flannigan, Tietgen. What we're doin' is legal. Put up that gun!"

Well, sir, the door opened an' the whole danged tribe comes marchin' out to meet us. Sam's shoulders quivered at the sight of 'em, but he moved forward in spite of it.

Tietgen, who was followin' the bunch, set his rifle in the doorway as he come out. His six-shooter was hanging in the usual place at his side. He was big enough to have taken Sam across his knee, yet I noticed he was danged cautious about keepin' someone else in gun range.

"Maybe you'd best take the kids back inside, May," Sam told May Perrin.

"I want them to stay here!" Mrs. Perrin said defiantly. "I want them to remember what kind of a man you are, Sam Johnson! I want them to know how you stole our home when Mr. Tietgen was willing to carry us along!"

"You told me to stop borrowin' from Tietgen!" Joe Perrin put in angrily. "You said *he* was tryin' to cheat me. You're a damned liar, Johnson, an' I'm tellin' it to you to your face! Lars Tietgen is the best friend we've got."

Joe Perrin was a sort of a helpless guy. He was big, an' tall, an' I always did imagine a feller could look in one of his ears an' see right out the other.

"Maybe you an' me can do business, Tietgen," Sam said quietly, ignoring Joe Perrin.

I shook my head. I knew danged well Sam was tremblin' inside an' that every muscle in his belly was in a hard knot, yet there he was actin' like he was tryin' to make an easy deal.

"I'll help these people if I can," Tietgen said. "What's your proposition?"

"How about givin' me twice what I paid?"

Joe Perrin whipped out his six-shooter. "I'll give you what you got comin'!"

I tried to step in front of Sam because I didn't figure Joe would go so far as to let me have it, but the hammer on his six-shooter clicked a different story.

SAM shoved me to one side. He started toward Joe talkin' like he was passin' the time of day with one of Joe's nine kids. "Put that gun away, Joe," he said. "This here deal is out've your hands. If you was to kill me you'd go to jail an what would happen to your wife an' kids? Put that gun away now."

Well, sir, Joe he began to sniffle, eased the hammer down on his six-shooter an' put it back in its holster. Maybe it was my imagination, but I thought I could feel a shudder goin' through Sam Johnson's body in spite of the fact that he was three-four feet away.

"He's right, Joe," Tietgen said. "It's a dirty holdup, but I'll pay him what he asked an' be glad to help you folks."

Sam gave a sudden jerk to his gunbelt an' his feet shuffled a bit on the hard-packed ground. "That figure would make it five thousand dollars, Tietgen," he said quickly. "I'll close the deal right now for ten thousand; I'll give you thirty seconds to make up your mind."

"Seventy-five hundred," Tietgen said coldly. "Take it or leave it."

"I'm leavin' it," Sam fired back. "Even a feller like Joe Perrin can see that if a place he bought for a couple of thousand suddenly is worth seventy-five hundred there's a trick somewhere."

Lars Tietgen ran his tongue around his teeth an' spat out snuff. He kind've leaned forward and glared at Sam as if he started to say something an' the words got caught inside somewhere. I didn't have time to figure what

was goin' to happen even though I cussed myself for bein' dumb later on.

Tietgen, he just shoved a big fist down on the butt of his six-shooter an' fired through the open end of the holster.

Sam took the slug right in the middle. He hunched forward a mite an' it looked like he might topple over, but it was a move that put him in the clear where he could shoot without the possibility of hittin' one of the Perrin kids. The time that it took him to drop hammer on his weapon seemed forever, but he got a bullet goin' fast enough to stop Tietgen.

A dark spot showed in Tietgen's low forehead. His mouth looked like he was tryin' to say somethin' in spite of the fact that he was a trifle on the dead side. He leaned forward too far an' fell on his face.

"Tietgen worked for the Acme Copper Company." Sam Johnson was hunched over, holding his belly. "I figured he was tryin' to cheat Perrin out've the place an' that there must be copper on it. He all the same as admitted I'd guessed right when he offered seventy-five hundred dollars. I never did record my deed an' I don't intend to unless Joe falls for some other crooked scheme."

I helped Sam into the house an' on the way he whispered he wanted me to examine him alone. Mrs. Perrin tried to be of some help. She shoo'd the kids out've the place an' sent Joe runnin' for the doc. She sort've hung on at the door an' I motioned her to get out because I knew Sam had somethin' to say he didn't want her to hear.

Well, sir, when we was alone Sam he just started shakin' like he was havin' fever chills.

"Tell me what you think about it, Nat." Sam sounded like he was beggin' for a good reply.

"The hole's off center," I said. "Nothin' to get excited about. You ain't skeered about a little thing like that, are you, Sam?"

"Yes," Sam admitted. "I'm afraid to die, Nat."

I didn't say nothin' for a minute because I was watchin' Sam's face. The skin was pasty white, the corners of his mouth was twitchin' an' there was that drawn-in look like a feller who has give up. The change was the thing that sent chills up an' down my spine. Suddenly the color started comin' back to his cheeks, muscles bunched below his temples an' he opened his mouth an' actually grinned.

"Listen, Sam," I said. "You're a little guy. You don't have to stick your neck out every time somebody gets into trouble. If you're afraid of losin' your life you'd best get busy an' lose some of that courage you toss around. That's a hell of a lot better than bein' dead, ain't it?"

Sam's grin toned down a mite. He laid a hand on my arm in such a way that I was ashamed.

"When a fellow loses his courage," Sam said. "He *is* dead."

HELL AT LOW WATER

Seeing a picture of an old-time frontier river steamboat, you may have wondered as to the purpose of the posts and spars visible on either side of the foredeck. Besides being used for loading and unloading freight and putting out and taking in the gangplank, they were also employed in helping lift the boat bodily over sandbanks.

When a boat grounded, spars were let down on either side of the bow to be driven fast into the river bed, slanting steeply forward. Hawsers were then rove through heavy blocks fastened on top the spars, through similar blocks fastened on the deck, to be secured around the capstan. While the turning capstan hauled on the hawsers, lifting the front of the boat, the paddle-wheel was thrown in reverse, backing enough water under the boat to float her several inches higher. The slant of the spars pulled her forward by gravity—despite the backing wheel—and the boat was thus literally lifted over the obstacle on stilts.

In case the current was too strong for the paddle-wheel to back sufficient water under the keel, a hawser was then run from the capstan to a tree on the bank and the boat warped upstream by that means, while still being lifted in front, of course. If a tree was not available, a "dead man," a heavy log or large timber, was buried deeply in the bank for substitute.

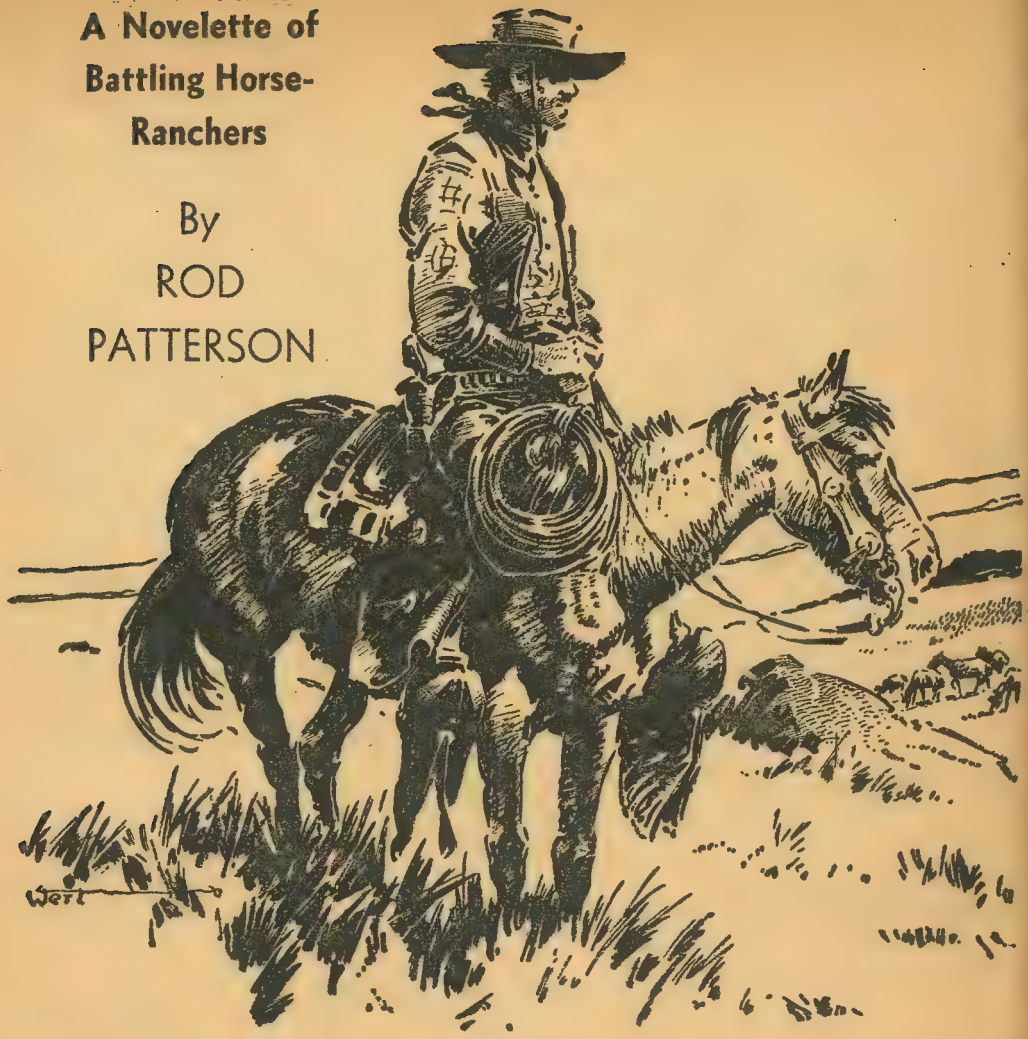
The lifting might need repeating several times before a sandbank was cleared. And each time the spars had to be pulled from the river bed by means of capstan and tackle. It was always a slow and laborious process, and *not* always successful. Sometimes the boat was merely hoisted to the middle of the sandbank to get stuck there, and to stay stuck till the next high water.

Taking it all in all, a riverman's life was hell at low water!

—*Dave Sands*

A Novelette of Battling Horse-Ranchers

By ROD PATTERSON



BLACKLEG BOSS OF

A woman, a graybeard jailbird and a double-crossing, shoot-in-the-back horse-trader shared that lonely house with young Dan Clintock, whose single chance for life was the rope that stretched through the storm-ripped night—to snowy, stark-cold blizzard death!

CHAPTER ONE

Satan Deals a Hand

DAN CLINTOCK, tall, easygoing, lounged in the narrow doorway of the log house that afternoon in late November, watching the wind sweep the grass flats to the southwestward of the C & S horse ranch. He had been standing here for some time, staring toward the escarpment at the point where the trail dived into this secluded, rim-locked, spruce-studded valley. He had whimsically made a bet with himself that his partner Fred Santana would put in his appearance at two

Rudith Trask came slanting toward him from the valley to the west.

LONESOME VALLEY

o'clock. It was now quarter past two; and he had lost his bet. Dan grinned at his own foolishness, reflecting out loud: "One more day alone and I'll be talking to myself like a damned old maid!"

He was on the verge of going into the house to kill the last drink in a pint bottle of whisky he had been saving when a movement high on the caprock caught his eye. Paused, with his head turned, squinting through the thin, hard sunlight, he saw three moving specks against the blue, metallic sky.

Was it possible Santana was bringing company home with him? If true, it would be out of character for a moody and secretive man who was certainly not given to making or keeping friends.

Though they had been partners in this ranching venture for over a year, Dan knew very little about Santana's past and lately had ceased being interested in it. They had met in a saloon and had decided to pool their money and go in the horse trading business. They had shared the house, the grub, and each other's company since that day, Santana traveling and buying the stock and later delivering saddlers to the Army Post near Ranchester, eighty miles to the south; Dan doing the ranch chores, breaking colts, conducting the breeding end of the partnership.

Now he waited until the three riders had reached the valley floor and were only a mile or so away. He noticed with a start of surprise that one of the party appeared to be a woman. He saw the glint of copper-gold hair in the fall sunshine, a splash of color which was a woman's blouse.

The thought that it must be a woman came simultaneously with a feeling of pleasure, of actual anticipation. For ten months he had been, for the most part, alone here at the ranch, working, loafing, soaking up the mountain sun, enjoying his solitude, he now realized, with dwindling enthusiasm. The idea of a female to look at, to talk to, appealed to him suddenly; and he didn't, at the moment, bother to speculate on why any woman would come to this remote wilderness, especially in the company of a man like Fred Santana.

Standing in the open doorway, letting the small warmth of the sun strike into his long-boned body, he watched the advancing trio come over the twisting trail with growing interest.

Dan was a spare man—over six feet—and his muscles were long, the flesh of his arms, bare to the elbow, valleyed between long ridges. His hair, prematurely iron-gray at the temples, sorely needed a barber's shears where it curled up over the frayed edge of his shirt collar. His eyes, a deep, clear gray, looked out between high, taut cheekbones, under level sun-bleached brows.

He was twenty-eight, looked thirty-five, and he moved with habitual slowness, with a damn-it-take-your-time deliberation in everything he did. Only in the saddle of a wild bronc did he show the dynamic side of his nature. Breaking a horse, he was all steel and conquering vitality.

The quick *clip-clop* of hoofs surged over a rise to the south of the ranch, and then the three riders swung into view, aiming for the pole corrals which stood with the barns and sheds a hundred feet from the house.

DAN saw Fred Santana's sun-blackened face first, the flash of his eyes under his hat brim; and he saw the bowed-up figure of a second man, an oldster judging by his weathered face and scrub of salt-white beard. The woman—actually a girl of twenty-five or six—sat a sorrel pony whose saddle was equipped with *aperejos* that looked heavily loaded. The old man's saddle was burdened in the same way, an indication to Dan that the visitors, whoever they were, had come to stay a while.

Dan left the doorway as the three dismounted near the log-sided stable and barn. He sauntered down the short beaten path from the house, his eyes mildly encompassing the strangers, particularly the girl. She was pretty, though quite thin, with an air of diffidence about her. She had long legs and arms and she wore cowboy's jeans and half boots and a lemon-colored blouse.

"Hullo," Dan said as casually as he could, smiling at the girl, then looking at his partner. "Glad you're home."

Santana, a big, broad man in trail clothing and wearing a black, roll-brimmed hat, rarely showed anyone anything but a kind of dark aloofness. His heavy face was stolid now as he replied, "Meet Rudith Trask and her father, Bill. Folks, this here's Dan Clintock."

Dan eyed the girl with more brashness than he'd intended. The old man came forward, moving with a stringhalt gait a horny hand outstretched. "Howdy, son. Fred tol' us about you."

Dan shook hands briefly, still staring at the girl who had not spoken, merely had inclined her head. Her eyes were the color of amber in sunlight, her features finely drawn, her cheekbones wide and high.

"Pleased to have you, Miss—" He paused deliberately, glancing at Santana. "Not your wife, Fred?"

Santana's blue eyes glinted suddenly. "I said her name was Trask," he shot out surlily. "You deaf?"

"Sorry," Dan murmured, flicking his gaze back to the girl's slowly flushing face. "He always said what he needed was a wife," he explained apologetically.

"We aim to marry," Santana cut in on the same belligerent note. "Rudith's goin' to keep house for me till we can get to Shawnee Springs next time and find a dominie."

Dan shrugged indifferently, said to the girl, "I'll off-saddle your pony, ma'am."

"Never mind," snapped Santana. "I'll take care of it."

Dan grinned at his partner, a malicious twist to his mouth. He enjoyed heckling Santana because the big man took himself so seriously. "All right, Fred," he said, and turned, walking back up the path toward the house on the rise.

It was a single-storied affair, having four small rooms: two for sleeping, one of which had two bunks, the other one, a kitchen and a larger living room with an open fireplace and rough pine furniture, an ancient horsehair sofa being the most luxurious piece.

Dan surveyed the living room's disorder when he came into it, the ironic twist still on his mouth. Then he shrugged and went to work, not hurrying but methodically putting things half way to rights.

He finally gathered up his own effects: a box of .30-30 shells, a six-shooter which he had been cleaning recently, a rifle, some old books, a spare pipe and a box of tobacco. He carried the lot into his room at the rear of

a short hallway, dumped everything on his blanket and added to the pile with his extra clothing, his good boots, his gunbelt and the Colt he sometimes wore.

He toted the bundle back to the living room and dumped it near the door. Voices came to him from outside, then Rudith Trask came in, her chin up, her dark eyes touching Dan's gray ones and holding there. Before Santana and her father arrived, she said, "You're not moving out, I hope, on our account?"

Dan liked her voice; it was soft, even husky; and it stirred him strangely. "There's a room in the barn with a cot in it. I like it better than the one in there." He ducked his head toward the hallway at the rear.

She started to argue. "But, please—"

Then Santana came in, swaggering, carrying a pair of saddle bags. He looked at Dan, a queer tightness in his icy eyes, saw the bundle on the floor, and said, "Mebbe it's a good idee."

"Yeah," said Dan, and he grabbed up his bundle and walked out, passing the old man on the path without a word.

Trask turned and stared after him, then turned and went on toward the house, dragging his saddle bags along the ground.

The room in the barn had been used to store harness and extra saddle gear; Dan went to work and cleared everything out and put his things away, the smaller articles of clothing in an old bureau, his rifle in a corner, his blankets on the cot near the window. The spare revolver he tucked under some shirts and socks in the bureau's upper drawer; his gunbelt and Colt he hung on a wooden peg behind the door.

He went back to the house sometime later, seeing smoke whip from the tin chimney. They ate—the four of them—in the kitchen, a meal of fried salt pork and beans prepared by Rudith. It tasted fine to Dan who had sickened of his own cooking.

He had always taken changes in his stride. He had, in the past, been accustomed to chances—to changes. He liked both. They meant he was a free man with a free will, that his horse took him wherever and whenever he wanted to go.

During the meal, he let his thoughts run, concluding finally that it was time to pull his picket pin and drift. He made up his mind to offer his share of the ranch to Santana forthwith, at a bargain.

And so, while Rudith cleared off the dishes and prepared to wash them at the sink, he tipped back in his chair and looked at Santana, saying, "Fred, I'm pullin' out. Bring out the bank book and figure what I got comin'. And you can have my half of the spread for five hundred."

"What's the matter?" Santana was rolling a cigarette, his blue eyes lifted suddenly as in surprise. "You got a bellyache about something?"

Dan shrugged. "Just tired of lookin' at your mug," he drawled. Santana sat solidly in his chair, his broad-boned face expressionless except for a sudden glint in his ice-hard eyes. "Hell, I'm satisfied with the way things is," he said after a long moment of silence—a silence in which Bill Trask stared blankly at both men and Rudith quit rattling crockery at the sink and looked around. "You'd better be," Santana added pointedly.

Dan eyed him with carefulness and no particular animosity although anger was a fanned flame inside of him. "We agreed," he finally stated in the same slow tone, "to make a deal if one of us wanted to pull out."

"Changed my mind," the big man answered heavily, his blue eyes pin-pointed on Dan's still face.

Dan leaned his hands on the table, his head bent a little, a tightening around his eyes and mouth, not much. "Listen, Fred, you'll never stop me if I want to go. I can take that bunch of colts on the south pasture as my share in the spread."

"You mean you c'n *try*," Santana reminded him softly, no change in the hardness of his face.

"Cut the deck a bit deeper, will you?" Dan asked mildly, blandly, his anger now fanning into full heat.

Santana leaned back easily in his chair, eyes unblinkingly steady. "I've said all I'm goin' to say. You'll stay till hell freezes if I say so."

Dan rose from the table, still staring at the seated man, ignoring the old man on his right who was watching all this with some wariness. Dan got his hat from behind the door and put it on. Just before he went out into the smoky sunlight, he glanced back. "All right, Fred," he said. "We'll see." Then he went out, leaving a silence in the kitchen.

CHAPTER TWO

When a Man Is Lonely . . . .

FOR the next three days Dan kept busy and out of the way. He continued to eat at the house, but spoke seldom and not at all unless he was spoken to. The weather had changed suddenly.

The sky over their valley had turned gray, and a northwest wind had sprung up and whooped day and night around the ranch and its grassy, timber-stippled hills. Winter was near.

Something about Bill Trask's manner continued to puzzle Dan. The old man seemed

jumpy, even furtive, and the pallor of his seamy face made Dan wonder. Once Dan asked him, "Where'd you work before you came here, Bill? You know horses, I see."

"Was a hostler," Trask answered evasively. "Been one all my life."

And Dan kept thinking about Rudith, and the way he thought about her didn't conform to the fact that she belonged, either by promise or implication, to his dour and taciturn partner.

He avoided being around the ranch proper when Santana wasn't there by deliberate design, not that he feared the big man. On the contrary. But his feelings when he was near the girl alone disturbed him unaccountably. Honest self-analysis finally told him it was because he didn't trust himself.

On the third day, a gray one filled with low scudding clouds and a bitter wind, Dan was loose-herding a string of mixed stuff from the holding corral to a sheltered spot in a canyon near Fox Meadow when, about a mile from the ranch, Rudith Trask, on her pony, came slanting toward him from the spruces that rimmed the valley on the west.

She rode well, as always, straight in the saddle, her head up, her copper-gold hair whipping in the wind. Dan let his string drift along the trail, and reined up, waiting for the girl to reach his side.

His first impulse had been to warn her curtly to stay away from him, but, as she pulled in at his side, he forgot about everything but the attraction she had for him. Her amber eyes came to him, unwaveringly, as she held her pony in and said, "Dan, why don't you demand a showdown with Fred?"

He watched her across the narrow gap that separated their horses. "Why?"

She couldn't continue to meet his steady gaze, and dropped her own, nervousness in her manner, and something very like fear in her voice as she said, "He's plotting something, and I don't know what it is."

Dan laughed shortly. "Fred's all right, once you get to know him."

"Oh, Dan," she breathed, "I wish I could be sure of that."

Dan's bleached eyebrows went up a notch at the cryptic nature of her remark. "You think he'd do anything crooked?"

She forced her eyes to meet his, her lips opened, then closed. Then she blurted, "I've been looking at the ranch books. I found something—"

He waited, not speaking, his gray eyes impersonal and almost cold.

"Dan," she said presently, "did you know Fred has an account of his own at the bank in Shawnee Springs?"

He shook his head negatively, beginning to get what she was driving at. "What's wrong with that? But the only one I knew about is the joint account at Ranchester."

She reached a gloved hand out and gripped his arm, tightly, desperately. "Dan, he's been changing figures in the books. And the figures in the bank book at Ranchester are his own, most of them. I can tell by the way he makes his fours and eights."

Dan sat motionless. After a bit, he said, "Thanks for tellin' me that. I'll go over the bank book tonight, but I think you must be wrong. Fred ain't fool enough—"

She gave him a straight, hard look. "Dan, I'm afraid!" Then she cut her horse around and galloped back toward the ranch.

DAN took his string to the meadows with a troubled mind. He'd never had any reason to suspect his partner of dishonesty before this, and he didn't want to do it now. It was true he had been making his secret plans for cutting loose from C & S, true that he disliked the big man and his surly ways, and wanted to break away from him; but he wanted no real trouble with Santana, preferring to settle their argument quietly. He supposed that Santana's reason for refusing to break up the partnership had been rooted in stubbornness—that and the fact that he, Dan, had more than ordinary ability in the breaking of horses and would be hard to replace.

It was five o'clock when he returned to the ranch. He had off-saddled his roan and had stabled it and was heading for his room in the rear of the barn when the first storm of the winter hit the valley.

Through the window, he saw a whirlwind of dust and broken branches and grass cut across the flats to the south. And from that moment on, the temperature began to dive toward zero. He spent a half hour stuffing wads of burlap in the crannies around the window frame, another fifteen minutes bringing wood in and setting a fire in the small sheet-iron stove. When he had it going good, he went outside and scrutinized the weather with a practiced eye.

He saw the snow coming off the northwestward rim of the escarpment. It came swerving into the valley like a huge wind-whipped curtain. This blue norther, he knew from the experience of the previous winter, would strike in full force before dark. And there was a strong likelihood that the valley would be cut off for days from the surrounding country, or at least until the trail over the divide could be opened.

He went back inside and threw more wood on the fire. Then he heard someone on the stable planks outside his door. He heard the knock. He went to the door. It was Rudith.

She came in with a gust of wind, her hair whipped into a tangle around her head, her face glowing from the biting cold, still breath-

less from her run on the path from the house.

"I was here before," she gasped, standing against the closed door, one hand holding back a strand of coppery hair which had blown across her eyes. "You can't stay here tonight. This storm—"

"I'll be all right," he said past a tightness in his throat. He turned and went over to the stove, adjusting the dampers in the pipe. "Better go back to the house. I'll be up in a minute."

"The wind frightens me," she said hurriedly, and he heard her come up behind him and stand close. "Fred and my father haven't come in yet."

He looked at her. There was something about the way she said it, the way she stood there, a little unsteadily, that made him stiffen inwardly. He didn't understand it—this feeling he had about her—and he had never felt like this before.

Rudith's face was turned up toward his, her hands outstretched to the warmth of the stove. "What are you going to do, Dan? About Fred—if you find he's—"

He shook his head. "I never figure things ahead. I just do it when the time comes, whatever I have to do."

"You've got to leave," Rudith said. Her words trailed off as if she could not breathe right.

He could feel her eyes on him, and when he looked again, their eyes met and something traveled along the steady glance that stopped *his* breath. "Don't stand there like that!" he blurted savagely. "I—you—" It was his turn to flounder. He thought: *If she doesn't go there'll be hell to pay!*

She pulled her leather jacket together, and turned back toward the door. Paused there, one hand on the latch, she looked around, waiting, or seeming to wait. "Dan . . ." she began, then stopped.

He went toward her slowly, deliberately. He placed a hand against the door and stood there looking down at her. Her gaze shifted quickly from his face to his hand on the door. She murmured, "All right, I'll go now."

He dropped his hand and stepped back. She opened the door, and, as she went out, her fingers gently brushed his arm, lingered, then broke away. He let her leave without a word, his eyes intense, his mouth a long, hard-bitten line.

CHAPTER THREE

Storm Trap

THE queer silence that hung over the kitchen during the evening meal didn't seem disturbing to Dan—at first. But when the meal was finished, and Rudith had carried off the dishes and was washing them at the corner sink, the quiet suddenly produced a watchfulness in him.

He sat in a straight-backed chair against the log wall, his boots hooked over a front rung while he scraped the bowl of his pipe with the blade of his clasp knife. Santana went out and came back with his Winchester which he proceeded to take apart at the table under the chain-hung lamp. Bill Trask went into the living room for his evening nap on the sofa.

Outside, the blizzard howled and shook the house, buffeted the windows, shoved against the kitchen door with the sound of a battering ram. Suddenly, Santana stared over at Dan, and said, "Where was you this afternoon?"

"Fox Meadows," Dan told him quietly, still working on his pipe. "Shagged that bunch of yearlins up to the canyon till the storm's over."

After a short run of silence, Santana spoke to the girl at the sink behind him. "I seen you over near Needle Rock. What for?"

Rudith took her time about answering. Finaly her voice came defiantly: "What harm is there in riding wherever I want to go?"

There was another strained silence, then Santana snapped, "You went to meet Clintock."

Dan flicked his gaze at the big man's florid face, gauging him, a sardonic smile along his mouth. "Don't be a fool," he said softly.

Anger gleamed in Santana's eyes. Then Rudith said calmly, "I didn't go to meet him at all."

Santana shoved his chair back and got up heavily. The parts of his rifle dropped to the table with a thud. He turned, taking a stand where he could watch both Dan and the girl. He looked at Rudith, articulating his next words with outright truculence: "What'd you go down to Clintock's room for? I watched you from the corral. You was in there the first time about ten minutes, the second time twenty."

Dan heard these words with wonder, and with rising anger that Santana was sneaky enough to spy on the girl and on him. Then he looked at Rudith. She stood with her back to the sink, drying her slim hands with a towel, her face quite pale, but a burning resentment in her eyes. He heard her say, "I went to darn Dan's socks. I—felt sorry for him, down there alone. I—"

"Who you goin' to marry?" Santana almost shouted. "Him or me?"

"Maybe nobody," her answer came whipping back. "You're not the kind of man I thought you were. You're suspicious—mean."

"Never mind!" Santana snarled.

Dan put away his knife and filled his pipe from a leather pouch, eyeing his partner with a hostile glance. "You talk like I aimed to steal your girl," he said with heavy scorn.

A blackness crawled over Santana's face. "If I thought you'd try—" He looked at Dan, then at Rudith. On his temple a vein, which had been hidden by the flesh, began to show—at first just a tracery of blue, like a river marked on a map; then it grew fuller and pulsed visibly. He turned and walked to the stove, lifted a pot lid and put more wood on the glowing fire. He clanked the lid back and wheeled, facing the room.

He barked at Dan, "From now on I'll watch you, mister—and you, too!" He pinned his slitted eyes on Rudith at the sink.

Dan puffed his pipe, staring at Santana. "You're makin' a big hooraw over nothin', Fred. Come down off your high horse, why don't you?"

Santana glared, then stomped over to the window and jammed it open. The roar of the storm immediately filled the room. The lamp sputtered and smoked as the gale swept in through the opening. The big man slammed the window shut, and whirled, moving toward the locker in one corner of the room. His face was beaded with fine drops of melting snow, his expression that of grim determination.

He took his gunbelt off a hook and strapped it around his hips, then slid into a yellow slicker, clamping his hat on last, and wheeling toward the door.

"Where you think you're goin'?" Dan inquired sarcastically.

"Never mind." Santana jerked open the door and ducked outside, slamming it after him. A fine mist of snow settled in the room when he had gone.

In the silence, Dan looked at Rudith. He saw her step toward him, then stop. She stood there, panic in her eyes, without saying anything. Her hand was lifted in a helpless gesture like a woman in the dark feeling for support.

THE ranch books, an assortment of bills, and two bank books lay on the kitchen table beneath a cone of light dropped by the chain-hung lamp. Dan's face was grimly set as he straightened at the table and stared at the girl standing next to him.

"You're right," he said reluctantly. "Fred's been stealin' me blind. Now," he added in a softer tone, "you better go to your room."

Rudith faced him resolutely. "No, I'll stay right here."

His mouth hardened. "Why'd you come to this God-forsaken hole in the first place?"

Her eyes on his were unwavering, defiant. "Because my father needed work, and—"

"It don't sound right," Dan said harshly, "that a girl would bury herself with three men because her father needed a job."

"Well, it's the truth," she threw back hotly. Then, averting her face suddenly: "All right, I'll tell you—you'll find out anyway. My father's been in prison. He got out a week ago and we've been looking for Fred Santana—"

"What's Fred got to do with your father's goin' to the calaboose?" demanded Dan.

Rudith forced her glance to Dan's still face. "I—didn't know it," she said slowly, distinctly, "until two days ago, but Fred let my father take the blame for stealing horses from the Indian Reservation in Piute County. Dad never told me, until I wanted to leave here and he said we had to stay!"

Dan saw the suffering in her eyes, but said relentlessly, "Why'd you say you'd marry Fred? You mean to say you'd do that for your father, too?"

Color flooded her cheeks at his question, but she answered steadily enough. "Fred's been good to me, these past two years. He loaned me money, said I could pay him back when Dad got out. I—trusted him."

"And now you know what he is?" Dan asked roughly. "A crook—a damned double-crossin' thief!"

She bent her head, then looked at him sharply. "Dad doesn't know what Fred's been doing here. I'll go in and wake him."

"No." Dan kept watching the kitchen door, listening for the thud of Santana's boots on the frozen ground. He suspected the big man had gone to the barn for some reason and would come back at any moment, honing for a fight. Dan was as ready as he could be under the circumstances. Even unarmed, as he was, he meant to settle things with his partner—settle them tonight. "Let your father stay out of this," he told the girl in the same gruff tone.

Rudith sat down in her chair at the end of the table, a stiffly erect figure in the lamplight, her hands clasped in her lap. Fear marked her face.

Dan let time run, seemingly unmoved by the pressure of waiting, of not knowing what mood would sway Santana when he finally came—not caring much. Anger, a deep corrosive bitterness, filled him now.

The stove began to smoke under the weight of the storm. Rudith got up finally and went to the window, opening it a slit and peering into the wind-lashed night. A gust of icy sleet and snow filled the room, and her voice came to Dan, thin and edged with dread. "I can't see anything but snow. Maybe Fred's lost."

"No such luck!" Dan said grimly, still watching the outside door. Then the thin thread of his patience snapped. He went to the corner locker, took down his sheepskin coat and Stetson hat and put them on, all of his movements quick and angry now.

"Where are you going?" Rudith said anxiously.

"Down to the barn. It'll be better to have it out with him down there, anyways."

She tried to argue, to plead; but Dan was determined. He moved to the door and flung it open to the storm. He had to use force and brace his feet to haul the door shut; and when he turned and strode toward the path the wind hit him like the end of a plank. He wheeled around under that terrific impact, facing the house, fighting to get his breath.

Snow and sleet pelted his back like hard-thrown gravel and sand. When he turned to face the wind again, all he saw was a woolly, horizontally driven curtain of white, solid, opaque.

And the gale was a force too terrible for any man to face for longer than a few minutes. The cold struck through his coat and crawled up his legs and turned his breath to crystals of ice on his turned-up collar.

A HEAVIER snow had begun to stick to the ground; he could not see it but he felt it rise around him when the wind raked it up in quick explosions and threw it in his face, slapping stinging sheets of sleet at his body like the salt-sharp spray of sea breakers.

Far distant in his mind was a colorless thought: *Be a fool for luck if I make it down there and back tonight!*

Then he ducked his head and plunged for the path. Something slapped taut across his chest and threw him backward on his heels. He reached out, groping, and his hands struck a rope which seemingly was suspended in mid-air, but actually was fastened at both ends—one end to part of the house, the other deep in the roaring storm in the direction of the barn.

In that moment of surprise, he saw what Santana had done; and he remembered the hundred-foot length of hemp line used for making lariats that had hung recently in the woodshed adjoining the kitchen ell. He grabbed at the rope and swiftly retraced his steps to the shed, finding where his partner had knotted one end of the rope to a cleat in the wall.

Caution governed Dan's next move. In his mind he foresaw the danger that he, himself, might not return to the house. At least there was an even chance that in the knock-down-drag-out fight he was bound to have with the burly ranchman, he might be the loser. In that event Dan meant to spare Rudith from possible harm by making it difficult for the big man to get back to the house while the storm continued.

Dan therefore pulled out his knife and cut the line loose from its wall cleat, then seized the end and turned back toward the path. He walked forward, coiling the rope over his right arm, holding it taut against its anchor at the far end, presumably the barn.

He hadn't gone fifty feet when he stumbled into a clump of brush. Swiftly, and with rapidly numbing hands, he fastened the free end of the rope to the clump, then moved on, guiding himself along the line, stumbling, slipping over the rough, uneven ground.

There was a sudden blur in the white smother of the storm, then the shape of the barn materialized before him. He came against the log wall with a jar, gasping for breath, done-in by the punishing wind. The rope, he found immediately, had been secured to an iron ring in the logs.

After a moment's rest, he ducked along the side of the barn, found the door and cut inside. The relief from the gale was a terrific let-down, and the sudden silence seemed deafening. Then he saw a streak of yellow light down low at the far end of the stable which was, he knew, lamplight shining through a crack beneath the door of his quarters.

He had not lit the lamp when he left the room two hours ago; therefore Santana had done it, and was doubtlessly waiting in there by the stove. It was a violently unsettling thought, but one that put him instantly on his guard.

He advanced upon that slit of light, feeling warmth come to his body slowly. At the door, he checked himself, left hand going to the latch which was a string on a cross-bar. Poised, motionless, listening, he waited a few moments, then jerked at the latch and kicked the door inward all in one motion, entering the room at a single long stride.

The room was empty, but had not been vacant long, for the snap and crackle of fresh fuel in the redly glowing stove indicated that Santana had stoked it only a few moments ago.

Even as Dan saw this, a step came behind him. Santana's voice followed quickly, a sibilant, warning snarl: "Scratch air, fella—put 'em up!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Clintock Stakes a Claim

DAN'S shoulders cupped forward with a start. Then, a sickening chagrin stabbing through him, he turned slowly to face the big man who stood so tall and silent in the open door. He knew then, too late, that Santana had been hiding somewhere in the stable, expecting him to make the blunder he had just committed.

Santana advanced a step into the room. There was the hard shine of lamplight on the sixgun in his hand, a maddened brightness in his hard blue eyes. He kicked the door shut with his heel, covering Dan with the gun, inching toward him, stiffly, cautiously, walking as a cat walks when scenting prey.

Dan held his arms up, bent at the elbow,

palms outward; his eyes burned steadily on the other man's wind-flushed face. Santana halted three paces away, intoning his words hoarsely: "Figured you'd be fool enough to foller me." He paused, went on in a harsher, louder tone: "Rudith said she came down here to darn some socks of yours. There ain't any in that bureau over there. *That* proves she lied to me—she came for something else!"

Dan felt a crawling sensation up his spine. He kept his tight gaze on Santana's twitching face, then threw the challenge back: "She's too good a girl for you, you damned blackleg!"

"*You'll* never get her!" the big man said in a strangled voice, his eyes hot light. The gun in his hand wavered, then grew still. "You double-crossed me, the pair of you!"

"Look who's talkin' about double-crossin'!" Dan chanted softly, mockingly. "You been tryin' to swindle me out of my share in this outfit! You drew the money out of our bank and put it in the one at Shawnee Springs in your own name! All these months you've been antigodlin' all over hell, featherin' your nest—while I stuck here like a fool and thought you was on the square!"

Shock loosened the muscles of Santana's face. He stared at Dan, blankly, then with growing wonderment. "How'd you find it out?" he gasped. Then the dammed-up blood began to congest his florid cheeks. Hate streaked his staring eyes.

Only a yard separated the two men. Dan knew he would have to move swiftly and at once or not at all. He measured Santana, gauged the distance automatically, then sprang at the man with piston-driven suddenness.

Twisting as he lunged, he reached the big man as he fired. The report and the spear of orange flame came together, then the bullet smacked the wall across the room. Dan's violent effort to side-step that gun threw him into a stagger that made him miss his swing at the big man's jaw.

Before he got his balance and pivoted, Santana slashed at him with the barrel of his gun. It was vicious, down-cutting blow. Dan had a fleeting glimpse of the descending rod of steel and futilely tried to duck. Then he was struck by streaks of zigzag lightning and everything went black. . . .

Fighting back to awareness, he sensed that he was striking out with his hands, twisting, writhing on the floor. Coughing racked him as he rolled over and got on his hands and knees with his head lopped down between his elbows. Then, in a flash, he smelled the smoke!

Choking, gasping, he raised his head. The room was filled with a crimson glare. Flames were leaping along the log walls yonder; and he saw that Santana had overturned the stove, that the floor, the walls, the whole end of the room was ablaze.

On his feet, still stunned by the blow of his partner's gun, he staggered for the door. He missed it and collided with the wall, but made it on the second try, breaking out into the cold air of the stable, falling, and getting up again, staggering on until he tumbled through the stable doors and fell flat again in the snow.

He hit on his face, his head bumping the ground defenselessly. Knocked silly, he lay there, sucking in long gasps of icy air.

On his feet, he stared about him, located the rope and the iron ring and dove for it. The rope was taut, and vibrated in his hands, which was proof enough that Santana was at the other end of it, floundering in the storm.

The fire inside the barn was audible even above the steady racket of the storm. Mingled with the gale, the flames made a snarling roar.

Dan got his knife out, cut the rope in two swift slashing moves, then wheeled and set his feet and pulled back hard. The pressure at the other end slackened suddenly, then jerked tight and swung in an arc to the left.

Within moments, Dan knew, the stable, the barn, would be a towering pillar of flame in the blizzard. There would be no shelter here for a man when the fire died down—he would freeze to death within an hour.

SANTANA was out there in that ruck of wind and snow, at the far end of the rope which by now he had found was severed from its anchor on the house.

By the erratic pressure on his own end of the line and by the crazy swinging back and forth of the rope itself, Dan pictured the antics of the big man, could see in his mind how Santana was gripping his end and frantically circling in the hope of coming eventually against the house. Dan realized that if he did, Santana would fling away his end of the line.

This conviction brought with it a terrible, unsettling need for haste. He knew he must act swiftly if he was to save himself from being cut loose in this incredibly icy gale. And now, behind him, the flames began to spurt against the swirling darkness. The roar of the burning barn rose louder in his ears; an eerie glow was reflected against the snow.

He quickly dallied the rope around a wrist, took a bearing on where he believed the house to be, then struck off over the rough ground, moving at a sharp angle to the right. He meant to use the floundering Santana as a pivot, meant to gamble on striking the house at the end of his first long arc. It would be a tug-of-war, a tug-of-death actually, with the winner safe at the house, the loser cut adrift in the storm. . . .

As soon as he left the shelter of the flaming barn the wind got behind him and shoved him forward at a headlong run. He had expected Santana to swing his end of the line farther to

the right, toward the house, and had braced himself for a sudden loosening of the rope. Instead Santana appeared to swing left.

This move shortened the sweep of Dan's intended arc, and he stumbled and veered, his legs thrashing through low brush.

Then the rope slackened suddenly as Santana took a new tack and came toward him. Dan took a fresh hold on the line, wheeling hard to the right, running, stumbling, slipping, keeping the rope as taut as he could.

The way it was now he could hear nothing save the steady roar and whistle and scream of the wind.

The force of the gale boosted him head-onward. He had no worry about sliding past the house for, even if this happened, he would feel the line slap tight against the house's wall, and could then cut back and reach the building easily. The danger was that he would not get far enough for this to happen.

Now Santana had stopped stock still and was bracing his weight against the swinging rope. Dan seized this moment to change his course. He went sprinting to the right again.

The rope hit the house long before he figured. He didn't see it, but the line snapped hard against the logs and vibrated in his numbed fingers as it whipped around a jutting corner on his left. The rope whipped out of his hands, ripping flesh off his wrist as it snapped off into the storm.

Dan lunged forward, stumbled, fell sprawling. Anchoring his fingers to the frozen ground, he stared in front of him. He couldn't see the house but kept his eyes pinned on the spot where he knew it must be. Then he began crawling forward, never once daring to let his gaze drop.

When the wall of the house materialized out of the storm he stood up with a cry of relief and ran against it, sagging there, breathing painfully from the bottom of his lungs.

He found he was standing against the eastward wall of the house. The feeling of the logs against his shoulders was the finest sensation he had ever experienced.

THEY sat—the three of them—in the warm kitchen by lamplight that gradually faded out as daylight came through the frost-rimmed windows. The old clock on the shelf said it was five after five.

Outside, the storm, which had raged throughout that long, tense night, was now only a murmurous growl around the logs. Dan sat at the table, Rudith across from him. Bill Trask was hunched in a chair near the stove.

Dan had assembled the parts of Santana's rifle and the weapon lay across the table cloth, loaded, ready to be used when and if the pinch of action demanded it. Dan filled his pipe with clumsy, frost-bitten fingers, and while he held a match to it, he stared at the old man.

"I don't care what you done before you came here, Trask," he said distinctly, "but I can't get it through my head why you took up with Fred all over when he let you go to jail for him—why you let Rudith promise to marry him and came out here with her, knowin' what kind of a life she'd lead."

The old man wore a hang-dog look. "All right," he said remorsefully, not meeting Dan's intent gaze, "I got it comin' to me—and plenty more. I been an old fool, a plumb selfish old man. Fred had me buffaloed, I guess. He lent Rudith the money to live on and never harmed her those two years I was—away. Figured mebbe he was tryin' to square hisself with me—with her. That's why I kept my lip buttoned about his part in that Injun deal—why I looked him up when I got out. You see—"

"Never mind explaining things!" Rudith said it sharply, though a weariness beyond endurance had crawled into her voice. "What's done is done."

Dan got to his feet and reached for his sheepskin on the chair next to him. "It's daylight," he said calmly. "The storm's blowed out. I'll go outside and have a look around."

He was gone only a few minutes. And when he came back, stamping snow off his boots, there was a gravity on his face, a somberness in his clear gray eyes. "Well, I found him," he said quietly, "down near the barn. He tried to stay alive while the fire lasted—it wasn't long enough."

Rudith rose slowly, facing him. There was no pity in her eyes and none in her voice. "Hate killed him. I guess it was meant to be," she said. She looked at Dan a long time, then asked, "What are you going to do? That money he stole—"

Dan shrugged. "I've got this ranch and the stock—the money don't matter." He looked at her steadily. "And I've got something else."

When she dropped her gaze away, the weariness came to her face. Dan took her by the arm and led her into the living room. He made her lie down on the sofa, and covered her with a blanket. "Now you can get some sleep," he said. "I'll saddle up and try to get through to Ranchester later. Got to tell the sheriff what happened here."

Her eyes held his steadily from where she lay, and her look softened for him to see. "It's been a long way home," she sighed, and closed her eyes.

Standing at the door, a moment later, he watched her fine features sweeten and relax. He waited in silence for a while, then, grinning a bit, he left the room and very softly closed the door.

GUTS—THE FIGHTIN' KIND!

By THOMAS THOMPSON

TWENTY-SEVEN cows weren't much of a herd, but it was enough to put a man into the cattle business if he had a lot of guts and a section of land. Aubrey Yates had both. He had been born with the first; a pocket full of Civil War script had given him the second.

When he first talked about his plan, the settlers he came with said nothing, and Hank Cartwright, who spoke of railroads and town sites, just laughed and let it go at that. The cattlemen already in the country measured their horse corrals in sections so they were about as interested in Aubrey Yates as if they had been brushing a fly off their weather-beaten faces. So Aubrey Yates went ahead and made plans for his twenty-seven cows.

But finally Hank Cartwright took a more personal interest. He liked to be boss. This town he had laid out was his big idea, and he had brought the settlers and he wanted them to play his way. Hank Cartwright was beginning to get ugly about Aubrey Yates and his twenty-seven cows. And if the set of Bill Pruitt's shoulders as he rode that big bay of his through the bosque there meant anything, the cattlemen were beginning to get ugly, too.

Civil War minnie balls had taught Aubrey Yates the blessings of peace—and peace showed Aubrey how quick a man can talk himself to death!

Aubrey Yates had liked Bill Pruitt from the first. Pruitt, his wife Bessie, and the traditionally old Pitchfork outfit that knew no borders represented about everything Aubrey Yates admired.

At first Bill Pruitt had grinned and joked a little about Yates and his cowpen herd, and he and Bessie had both been friendly. But friendship had changed over now into the limbo that exists between liking a man and hating him. Bill Pruitt had started giving advice, and that advice was for Aubrey Yates to take his cows and get back with the settlers where he belonged. Watching Bill ride up here now Aubrey got the idea Bill was a man who backed up his advice pretty strong, and Aubrey liked even that. Being a cattleman did that to a man. Aubrey went out to greet him.

"Howdy, neighbor," Aubrey said, affecting a slight drawl he had been practicing. "Light a spell. I got a pot of Arbuckle on the cook stove. The damn stuff'll taste right good."

Bill Pruitt stepped down gracefully and took Aubrey's offered hand. "Figgered you might be gone, Aubrey," he said easily. He stood there waiting for an answer, his face friendly but worried, and he rolled himself a cigarette.

"Shucks, no," Aubrey Yates said. "Them cows of mine are gettin' fatter than grizzlies in a berry patch." He picked up a stick, cut himself out a smart-sized toothpick and used it diligently. "Glad you come over, Bill," he said then. "Been wantin' to talk to you."

Bill Pruitt seemed to heave a little sigh of relief. "I'll buy your stock, Aubrey," he said.

"Heck, I wouldn't want you to do that," Aubrey said easily. "But if you'd let me cut out a few of the best and slip 'em into that trail herd you boys are talkin' about I'd work out a deal to your likin'. All's I want to do is come out with enough to buy me a good range bull."

A look of pitying disgust came into Bill Pruitt's face. "Guess I'm gonna have to talk straight to you, Aubrey," the young cattleman said. "Squattin' in here with a section of land and a cowpen herd ain't healthy for you, and I don't want to see you get hurt. You better get out while the gettin's good. Go on back with the nesters you come with. There's good land over across the river and plenty of room."

"I won't cause no trouble," Aubrey promised, and he saw Bill Pruitt shake his head and heard him start putting his sentences together as if he were talking to a kid.

Aubrey listened patiently while Bill Pruitt explained what he was up against. The cow folks hereabouts were trying to get things rolling after a half dozen years of neglect. They were beating the brush on the biggest cow hunt the state had ever known—slapping their brands on every mossy horn that dared stick his wall eyes out of a thicket and going in after those that wouldn't come out. No one man owned anything in particular—it was catch as catch can, and since everyone had run plenty of cattle before the war a hundred head one way or the other didn't make a lot of difference. A man with twenty-seven cows didn't fit

into that picture. Aubrey nodded silently as he heard the cattleman out, then a big grin broke over his homely face.

"You're worrying about nothing," he said happily, and to Bill Pruitt's question he walked over to the lean-to shed by the house and came back with a running iron. "There you are," he said proudly. "Bar Y, it'll be. All registered and everything. If some of your boys will give me a hand I'll get my stuff branded and that will be it. Far as you and the others maverickin' on my land, shucks I'll let you. I'm just a Johnny-come-lately and it

Jackson slid crazily out of the saddle.

stands to reason anything you find won't be mine." A puzzled frown crossed his forehead. "Think I did right gettin' a runnin' iron, Bill?" he asked. "There's some as says a stamp iron makes a bad burn and ain't so good—"

Bill Pruitt stepped back on his horse. Leaning forward with both hands on the apple horn he said, "Let me put it this way, you damn block head. Everybody but me figures you come in here expectin' your cows to have six calves each, is that clear? Now you show up with a runnin' iron and you're gonna get yourself weighted down with lead. These boys have had four years of fightin' and they didn't come

out so good. All they want now is peace and quiet and you sittin' here in the middle of us don't help us get it. They're scared of you because nobody can be as ignorant as you act. Up until now I been advising you, Aubrey. Now I'm telling you. Take your damn cows and get to hell out!"

Aubrey Yates stood there whittling, watching Bill Pruitt disappear through the thicket. To himself he surmised that Bill Pruitt was about as hard-headed a young buck as he had ever met. He was still thinking it over, wondering what chance a man would have taking a dozen or so cows to Kansas by himself, when he saw Hank Cartwright tooling his buggy up the narrow road toward his place.

CARTWRIGHT was a big man. He had a booming voice and a personality to match. To hear him tell it he was personally responsible for getting people interested in railroads west of the River and he had a hand in the development of every town on the prairie. The names of senators and even of the president rolled off his tongue like butter off a hot knife. It sounded like quite a bit of talk to Aubrey, but looking at Hank Cartwright's clothes and the diamond he wore in his tie, maybe some of it was so. At any rate, Cartwright liked to do the planning and he expected folks to fall in line. Aubrey Yates, with his two-bit cow outfit across the river, was way out of line.

The promoter pulled his buggy up in a cloud of dust. With a gloved hand he placed the whip carefully in the stock and sat there, looking down at Aubrey in much the same way a man casually watches a beetle cross the road.

He said, "There's some new developments, Yates, and I'm the first one to give you credit for being a smart man. I'll see you come out all right."

Aubrey was not exactly a slow man, but this approach was so different from what he had expected that he stood there for a second, slack-jawed, and didn't answer. Hank Cartwright had had a lot of experience taking advantage of lulls in conversations, and he picked this one up now.

"First off, I didn't think much about you buying up this section," he said. "The way things are, a man never knows where he'll find free land. I didn't give you credit for knowing you was settling right in the middle of a patch of it."

Aubrey Yates had found his tongue now, and he had had time to realize that Cartwright was after something. He said, "I don't see how you *could* give me credit for settling in the middle of free land, Cartwright, because it ain't so. I'm pretty much surrounded by Bill Pruitt's Pitchfork, the Forked Lightning, and the Straddle Bug. Guess that don't leave much land, does it?"

"I'm talking about *legal* ownership of land—not what some outfit runs cows on," Hank Cartwright said. "For two three miles back on this side of the river is government land. Those outfits you name ain't even got a lease on it."

Aubrey grinned. "Guess they don't need a lease," he said. "They been runnin' cows around here a long time. There ain't no fences and I reckon it's just natural the cows will come here to the river to drink and maybe eat a little brush on the way in. Don't reckon your town will object to looking across the river at a bunch of cows drinkin', will they?"

"No, I don't suppose they would," Hank Cartwright said easily. "But they might not like the idea of cows in the street. I just got word the railroad is coming down *this* side of the river, so the town will be over here."

"Guess that there railroad goes just about any place you want it to, don't it, Cartwright?" Aubrey said. He was still smiling.

"You catch on quick, Yates," Hank Cartwright said. "Maybe you and me can do business."

"Ain't much to doing business," Aubrey Yates said. "Man just says yes or not, that's all. What's your proposition?"

Cartwright climbed down from the buggy. His condescending manner toward Aubrey had suddenly changed to one of equality, and when he spoke his voice took on an edge of eagerness Aubrey had noticed back home when Cartwright first organized the settlers. He squatted down on his heels and made scratches in the dust to indicate his plan.

"The river cuts through here," Cartwright said, making a crooked mark in the dirt. "Over here, where we first figured the town, is good bottom land. Grow anything. This side, where the cow outfits are, don't amount to much for farming, maybe, but it will make a good town site. Now then, if we develop this side for the town that gives us just that much more farm land on the other side, right?"

Aubrey Yates agreed that it was right, but he had already made up his mind what his answer would be to Cartwright's business proposition. He cushioned his decision some by saying, "Outside of a few flats this is pretty brushy over here. Maybe it would be just as easy to build the town where you first figured."

Cartwright's guard came up, but all he said was, "Don't take much to burn off a little patch of brush."

He went on then, painting a picture of the railroad, bridges across the river, schools. Aubrey Yates had listened to all this talk before so after a while he figured it wasn't impolite to break in. "What was your proposition to me?" he said bluntly.

"Well," Cartwright said in his best promoter manner. "I thought perhaps you and

me could get together for the best of all concerned—"

"Look, Cartwright," Aubrey said flatly. "You and me ain't liked each other since the day we met. You've made some big talk about how you was going to squeeze me because I didn't go along with your first plan. We ain't changed none in the last hour, so let's quit lyin' and get down to cases. What do you want?"

A sudden flush of color came into Hank Cartwright's face, but he did not lose his composure. He said, "All right, Yates, if you want it that way. You've got a toe hold on this side of the river. Cut me in and I'll see that this section of yours becomes the town site. Beside that, we can sell the additional land it will throw open on the other side for anything we want. You help me do the talking, because the folks that came with you will listen to you."

"And if I don't?"

"There's some don't like the way you suddenly deserted and decided to strike out on your own," Cartwright said.

"That would be Spence, Squeak Jackson, and Middlewood, I take it," Yates said, naming off the three satellites who hung around close doing Cartwright's bidding. "They must be handy gents to take along with you, ain't they, Cartwright?"

Hank Cartwright had dropped his mask of friendship. "Maybe they are, Yates," he said flatly. "At any rate, the railroad is coming down this side of the river and the town will be about here where your place is. You better figure out what you aim to do about it."

"Thanks," Aubrey Yates said. "I'll do that."

And as Hank Cartwright drove away and forded the river Aubrey watched the silver drops of water splash from the wheels and he thought over what he had just said. He didn't know for sure just what he intended to do, but of one thing he was dead certain. Of all the land available in Texas he had sure as hell picked the spot where he was wanted the least.

THAT feeling grew during the next two days, but Aubrey's conviction that he wanted to be in the cattle business grew right along with it. The reason for both was the sudden influx of Forked Lightning and Bug brushpoppers. For over half the first day Aubrey just stood there and watched through a pair of glasses as the canvas-jacketed leather leggined brushpoppers rode headlong into thorny thickets, dodging through rabbit burrows that could hardly be seen, or tailed up four-year-olds as if they were calves.

He saw them work the same country over and over—watched them build a corral with wings—saw them send tame stock into the brush. And he saw the short ropes make a catch when only a blind heel was showing.

He breathed deeply of the dust that floated even here, and the distant sounds were music to his ears. This is what he wanted. Then a Forked Lightning puncher drove six head of brockled mossyhorns right through the middle of Aubrey Yates' twenty-seven cows. That brought Aubrey to his feet in a hurry. The thing that kept him there was the fact that the puncher had turned, tailed up a tame cow, and others were running forward to take over and put a brand on her. Aubrey mounted the saddled horse he had kept clear, hoping someone would invite him over, and he rode out as his own rep on his first round-up. It was to turn out sadly.

He was friendly when he rode up to the branding fire, and he reached back, untied the running iron from its place behind the saddle and said, "That's a Bar Y cow, boys. I'd be obliged if you'd show me how it's done." The Forked Lightning man got to his feet, his hand straying toward his hip. Then he relaxed and started to laugh.

"So this is Yates, eh?" he said, still laughing. "Well, lookee here, Yates. Bill Pruitt told us we might have a little trouble with you. Bill is sort of a chicken-hearted gent—don't like trouble. Neither do we, so you get the devil out and leave us alone. You had plenty of time to move your cows and if you didn't do it, it ain't our fault. Anything we run across here is a maverick."

"All except twenty-seven of 'em," Aubrey Yates corrected. "I can cut 'em out real easy if you boys will help me brand 'em with my Bar Y—"

He never did remember whether it was four guns or five that suddenly lined on his belt buckle, but he knew how to read a man's eyes and he knew enough not to linger. Still carrying the running iron in his hand he rode back toward his soddy.

And that night was the worst night Aubrey Yates ever put in in his life. The single room of the soddy seemed ten times bigger than it ever had before, and dark shadows lurked in every corner. It wasn't fear—for he had never feared any man. Besides that, he liked the cattlemen too much to fear them.

He knew what a time they were having, getting back on their feet, and if their tempers were short and their decisions swift, his sympathies were all with them. No, it wasn't fear that was making the room so big. It was plain out and out loneliness. That night he would have given a lot for just one man to sit there across the plank table from him and have a cup of coffee.

He couldn't sleep, so he walked back and forth most of the night. Every time he sat down those corner shadows seemed to deepen and he was always conscious of the one toward his back. But it did give him time to do a lot

of thinking, and his conclusions brought him no place.

The only conviction that remained completely undimmed was the fact that he wanted to go into the cattle business. Every sound he had heard drifting in from the round-up: the faint sizzling smell of burned hair mixed with the perfume of glowing *chamiso* roots, the constant bawling and the clouds of dust. Those things had seeped inside him and struck a responsive chord that told him here was his life—the thing he had been cut out to do. He compared all this with the back-breaking task of splitting posts and following a furrow and that brought him to thinking of Hank Cartwright and his glowing promises to land-hungry men. And suddenly he realized that in his great concern over himself and his twenty-seven cows he had overlooked an even greater threat to his future dreams. Suppose the nesters *did* cross the river?

He made himself another pot of coffee and tried to figure out what that would mean. In the first place it would mean war and some would be killed. If it were some of the cattlemen whom he had taken as his model, that would be bad. If it were some of the nesters who had no more vicious thoughts than whether a piece of ground would grow corn or not, that would be worse. And sitting there alone the true value of Hank Cartwright came to him.

Cartwright was a man who could stir people to do things. With his eloquence and his ability to twist the truth, he could easily talk the nesters into crossing the river. And they would be pawns in his little game. Nothing more. Suppose a dozen of them were killed? What difference would it make? It would start a standing feud and it would be a flag signaling free land across the river. Others would come and others would be killed. But in time the nesters would win out. They always did. And while the crusaders were getting killed off, Hank Cartwright would see to it that some of the more easily swayed went in with him to control the land that would sell at fabulous prices as city lots in a town that would never exist on a railroad that would never run.

That was when Aubrey Yates decided his fight was not with the cattlemen or the nesters —but with Hank Cartwright and his methods of operation. He was able to sleep after that.

AUBREY was up early the next morning and when the sun came tumbling up over the brush it sanded his eyes and threw his sense of timing out of order. Seemed like noon when it was only six o'clock. But he had made up his mind what he should do.

In the first place, it was up to him to talk to the settlers and tell them what Hank Cartwright was up to. Convince them that the promoter was only using them as expendables in his long range fight to grab land.

He couldn't let them come face to face with the cattlemen, because that would mean a quick flare of temper and someone would get hurt. No, he had better go talk to them himself. As for the cattlemen— Well, they'd like him as soon as they knew him better. He'd have to convince them he wanted to be one of them. Show them he wasn't just a fly-by-night small scale rustler, but a man who had given up his past in order to pursue his future. Show them he had what it took to be a cattleman right alongside them.

That would take some time, but he'd work it out. The cattlemen were all right. Doggone it, you could see it by the way they worked. It was written all over their faces. The cow business just made a man basically good, that's all there was to it. Nothing could have shaken Aubrey's belief in that, because he wanted so much to be one of them, and a man couldn't tie a dream onto anything that was all wrong. He had thrown a dishpan of water into the already hot dust there in front of the soddy when he saw the first wagon hit the ford on its way across the river. He went back inside and carefully dried his hands.

He had been using paper cartridges in that old Colt he had. There were some on hand, so he loaded up and slipped the caps on the nipples. Then he took the single shot carbine and with his hat on the back of his head he started walking down toward the flat on his side of the ford.

There were six wagons across when he got there, and he recognized all the drivers and saw that they had left their womenfolks on the other side. Spence, Squeak Jackson, and Middlewood were on horseback, as they usually were, and they rode back and forth doing a lot of talking, but Aubrey noticed they kept close to the river.

The driver of the first wagon, a long lean bearded man whom Aubrey had known back in the Tennessee hills, greeted him laconically. "Howdy, Aubrey."

"Howdy, Tripp," Aubrey said. "Come across for fire wood?"

"Come across to stay," Tripp said.

"Don't reckon that's too smart," Aubrey said. "Ground's a sight better there on t'other side."

"Reckon we'll farm over thar and live over hyar," Tripp said, half grinning. "My old woman's been a harpin' for thutty years about livin' in town." Squeak Jackson had ridden up and had his head cocked to catch the conversation. He started bawling orders now for the wagons to spread out and start staking their claims. Aubrey said, "Hold on a minute, Jackson. I want to talk to these men. They're friends of mine."

"They ain't no friends of yours, Yates," Jackson said loudly. "They figger you're a damn renegade, comin' out here with us the way you did, then desertin' because you knew there was land across the river " There was a mumble of agreement from two of the wagons, but old Tripp just chewed a little harder and didn't move his rig. Spence and Middlewood came up and joined Jackson.

"The way I see it," Aubrey said, "Cartwright figgers on lettin' you folks come in here and get yourself killed off so as he can get his hands on some of this ground. Don't make no difference to him where he lays out a town. There's plenty of Yankee and carpetbag money that will line his pockets!" Squeak Jackson rode his horse against Aubrey and knocked him to one side.

"Cartwright made you an offer, Yates," Jackson said, his voice low. "If you're asking for trouble, you'll get it."

"Go on back over there where you know there's good land," Aubrey went on. "If I'm wrong about what I say, I'll deed this section of mine over to you, and you all know my word is good." Middlewood had ridden in from the other side. He reached down from his saddle and with a glancing blow of his fist sent Aubrey sprawling. The wagons did not move in response to his bawled orders. From the ground Aubrey could see the three Cartwright henchmen, sitting in their saddles. He let his hand close tightly around the single shot carbine.

Getting to his knees Aubrey said, "Tripp, you always was a sensible man. You take the boys back across the river before the cattlemen get here and you think it over a couple of days. Figure out what you came here for—was it land so you could grow stuff and feed your families? Or did you come out here to help Cartwright build a railroad town on paper?" He saw the quick movement of Jackson's hand and he threw himself flat on the ground. Jackson had jerked a gun from his waistband.

There was no further warning, and the shot echoed through the flat hot air. The horses reared and the wagon teams tugged against their harness. The ball burned a hot streak across Aubrey's ribs and he saw Jackson trying to swing his horse around to get in another shot. Lying there on the ground Aubrey Yates tilted his carbine and fired. Jackson slid crazily out of the saddle. He died instantly.

It left a sick spot in Aubrey's stomach, but he got to his feet, tossing the empty carbine aside and pulling his Colt as he did. The six-shooter covered Spence and Middlewood.

With his eyes fixed on the two Cartwright men he said, "Tripp, you saw what happened. I had to shoot. I didn't mean to, Lord knows. I've had enough of shootin'. That's why I don't want to see you get yourselves killed over nothing. Get back across the river, Tripp, and think it over, cool like."

The cocked gun in his hand kept Spence and Middlewood momentarily from making a move, then they wheeled their horses and splashed back across the ford. Tripp turned his wagon slowly and motioned for the others to follow. There were a couple of faint protests, but the other five wagons followed suit and headed into the river. Tripp leaned down and said, "Most of us will think over what you said, Aubrey. But Cartwright ain't gonna like it when he hears of it and there's some of the younger folks that he brung along to join up with us are likely to be back to see you."

"I figgered that out before I come to talk to you," Aubrey Yates said. "You pass the word around that I'll be waitin', and you stick to farmin' like you planned."

"I'll think it over, Aubrey," Tripp promised. "I always figgered Cartwright talked a sight too much about railroads and not enough about sorghum."

AUBREY YATES didn't have long to wait. He reloaded the carbine and took himself a spot on a high piece of ground and then he saw Spence, Middlewood and four others coming back across the river. They were all on horseback this time and Cartwright was coming with them. Aubrey called a warning to them, but they came on and dismounted there in the shallow water at the edge of the river. Each man had a rifle, and they fanned out to circle him. It was Cartwright himself who fired the opening shot.

"My offer still goes, Yates," Cartwright called. "Don't get yourself killed over nothing."

"That's what I was tryin' to tell the folks," Aubrey said. "I guess there's only one way to reason with you." He sent a ball over Cart-

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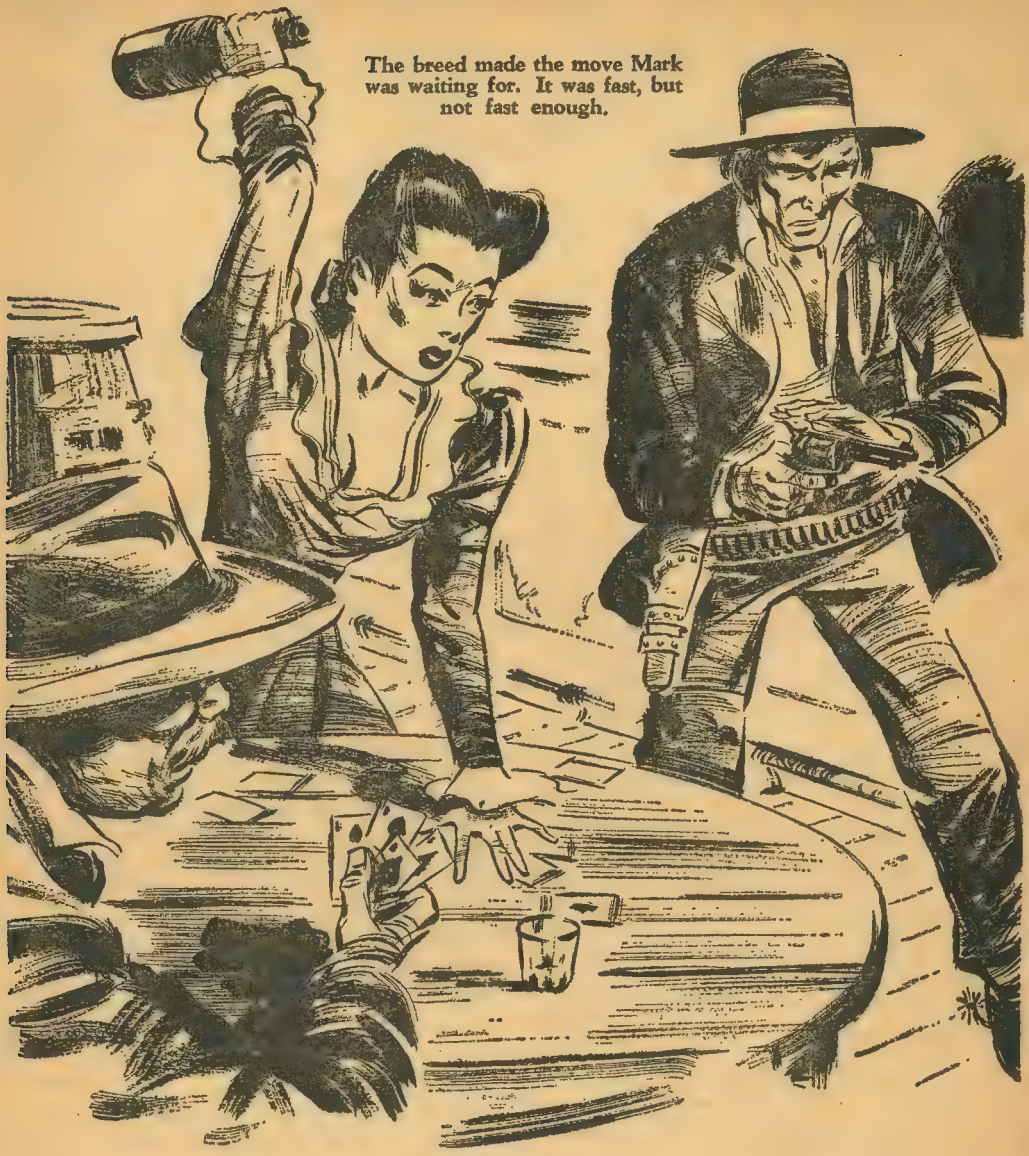
By MARVIN DE VRIES



The breed made the move Mark was waiting for. It was fast, but not fast enough.

TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS' WORTH OF DEAD MAN!

A Hard-Hitting Novel of the Lawless Range

CHAPTER ONE

Deadfall Decoy

Mark Sherry rode to the toughest town along that dangerous Strip country, and at once declared himself by posting this dodger: "I'm carrying ten thousand dollars cattle money from Dodge. I intend to ride on with it. Anybody object?"

THE name of the trail town—Lucy's Well—was painted on the side of Doc Quick's house in big red letters, just by way of letting strangers know where they were. Doc had done it himself, one time when he was tighter than a hoot owl, and had added a remark of his own. So now the whole thing read: "Lucy's Well—and how in hell are you?"

Mark Sherry gave the letters a lop-sided, cracked-lip grin. "My health's good," he observed. "But, now I'm here, it's apt to take a turn for the worse."

Lucy's Well was too notorious to need advertising. And too tough for a man to ride in alone and declare war, as Sherry intended. Mark realized that and reckoned he might, in the end, have to answer Doc's polite inquiry with a "not so good."

He sat his saddle gracefully. His face was brown, his eyebrows bleached to white slashes. He owned the Scarecrow spread, far south on the San Saba bottoms, and was heading home from Dodge with cattle money in his belt. But his chore in Lucy's Well might delay him a spell if the renegades pestering the trails took up the challenge he planned to make.

The town looked like so much discarded luggage tossed from a passing wagon. A thunderstorm, sulking in the sky, threw a saffron mantle over the derelict place and gave it a jaundiced look. The only restaurant, a shabby place falling apart at the joints, advertised, "Good Meals at Reasonable Hours. Check Your Guns With Gertie. Timid Folks Inside."

The town deadfall, called The Trailboss, was the biggest place in town. Mark pulled up at the tie-rail and dismounted. Lightning zig-zagged down outside town and a paint horse at the rail squealed frantically. A bow-legged man on the saloon gallery, who was pretending to watch the storm, tried to quiet the animal with a stream of profanity. Actually, he was watching Mark.

"Tallyin' the size of my bankroll," Sherry thought, "an' my gun, an' gall. An' countin' loot an' coup."

Sherry stepped onto the gallery as rain began to fall. A marshal's dog-eared, dead-or-alive dodger for the capture of Pete Alter, alias Busy Pete, alias Shirt-tail Pete, alias Jackass Pete, alias the Dakota Duster, was tacked up near the door. Mark stopped to read it. Busy Pete was wanted on several charges: gun-peddling to the Santee Sioux, bank and stage hold-ups, two murders, and for atrocities committed during the Civil War in Iowa and Kansas. The posted reward was five thousand dollars.

Busy Pete, from the record, had spent years being a very tough, uncaught turkey. His specialty now, the specialty giving Mark pause in Lucy's Well, was preying on drovers and cattlemen for loot and stock, and bushwhacking Texicans heading home with cattle money. Under the picture on the dodger, some wag had scribbled the following: "Tch, tch, Pete—naughty, naughty! Tuck in yore shirttail, Pete. It's a dead giveaway! We'd tell on you, Pete, but where would we be then, pray tell—in hell?"

MARK read them through, then remarked to the gallery loafer, "Seems like you got some purty comical characters around here, scribblin' all over the place."

"Doc Quick's the one who cuts all them damned capers," the other answered, moving closer. "You think they're funny?" The man was full of fidgets. He couldn't stand still a minute.

Mark gave him a careful look, and knew he was talking to the man on the dodger. "Doc must be quite a card," was all he would say. "Why do you s'pose they call that jasper Busy Pete? Because he's always wrastlin' around like he's got ants in his pants?"

Pete scowled, then laughed. "Mebbe," he agreed. "Mebbe cause he's always showin' up where yuh don't expect him. You headin' home from Dodge?"

Mark nodded. "That's the general idee."

"Have any trouble on the trail?"

"None to mention—so far."

"How'd you make out in Dodge? Did yuh git a fair price?"

"I did all right."

"You make a big drive?"

Mark began to grin. "I figured I might be asked some questions, so I wrote out the answers for one and all to see." He reached into his pocket, and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "I'll tack it up here so everybody who's interested kin read it."

"Nice idee," Busy Pete agreed. "Saves a lot of jawin'."

Mark pulled some tacks out of the lawman's dodger, and tacked up his own with a stone. "I'm carrying ten thousand dollars cattle money from Dodge," it read. "I intend to ride on with it. Anybody object?"

Pete cocked his head to one side, pursed his lips and, with a tremendous effort, read the written words. Then, with a sanctimonious air, he remarked; "If anybody does object, you come to me. I'll take care of yuh."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Mark said. "A friend of mine came through here some time back and had fifteen thousand dollars stole off'n him. He was lucky to come out with a whole skin. That buzzard there on the dodger took his money."

"Is that so? What was that there jasper's name?"

"It don't matter. He was a friend of mine, an' I'm a'goin' to settle that score, too. If you see Busy Pete around you kin let him know."

"I will," Pete answered. "I sure will."

Mark wasn't blustering. The shabby little hellion on the gallery there with him was as deadly as a trampled sidewinder—so deadly he could afford to look like a grubline bum. He could afford to keep his talk soft and easy, hiding his claws and fangs that way. He didn't need to go around acting tough. He was tough when business required it, and he probably knew a lot about Mark.

He probably knew, days ago, that Mark was coming, and the sum he had in his money belt,

and how he meant to take it from him. Mark was ready for the showdown. He knew Pete was no fool, and when the renegade invited him in for a drink, he knew Pete had made his first move.

"Don't mind if I do," Mark Sherry answered.

Dull light from the rain-splashed windows invaded the place. Mark reflected he had had dreary weather all across Indian Territory, and it felt good to be under cover again, with a drink in store. Three men were playing blackjack at a corner table. A girl was dealing, and Sherry stopped to stare. The smile she gave him, and the voice that lifted through the place like a song held him in his tracks. It was like a spell. He had to make an effort to break from her spell and follow Pete to the bar. He asked Pete her name.

"She sings tunes here," Busy Pete stated. "Name's Nan Crell. Big Charlie hired her f'r a song, ha-ha!" His laugh was abrupt. "The fat slob with the bottle is Doc Quick. Damned hellion's treatin' me f'r some kind of stomach ache I got. That's Big Charlie next to him. The breed's Tony White—Tony White Lance when he gits drunk an' proddy. Them other fellers is Monk Holt an' Archie Kane. They do odd jobs f'r me. That Archie's the damnedest feller with a gun I ever seen."

Archie was watching Nan Crell with hungry, intent eyes. He didn't look tough. He looked like he was in a daze. "I guess he's looney about the girl," Pete remarked. "He's been actin' that-away a coupla weeks."

THE barkeep served Mark forty-rod rotgut, and gave Busy Pete a special concoction he said was right out of the swill barrel. Pete gagged on it, and demanded whiskey, but the bartender shook his head.

"I can't do it, Pete. Doc says so. That's health-givin' stuff, he says, an' that's what you got to drink if'n it kills you."

"That fat slob's feedin' me poison," Pete bawled.

"Drink it up, Pete," Doc called over from the card table. "Big Charlie's stocked it on my orders, an' you gotta drink it. It's curative as hell. It'll make you feel like a new man, some time." Doc's eyes twinkled, but Pete took it for gospel.

"I'd gut-shoot you, Doc, if there was another medico within a hundred miles who had any idee what ails me."

Doc snickered. "I'm safe enough, Pete. Nobody short of a half-wit would live that close to this town, an' no half-wit'll ever find out what's wrong with you."

"Don't git too sure of yoreself, that's all I got to say," Pete stated, with a venomous, off-hand glare. "Tony, c'mere."

The breed got up. He was heavy-shouldered, thick-lipped and gray-skinned, his eyes slits crowded by high cheekbones. He wore a gun strapped down to his leg. He gave Pete an insolent grunt.

"I want you to meet this feller," Pete told him. "Shake hands. He says a friend of his had some money stole off'n him some time back. You know anything about it?"

Tony started to say he didn't, but changed it to a sudden blast of profanity and backed away from the bar. Pete looked surprised. "What's wrong, Tony?" he inquired. "What ails yuh?"

Mark tensed. He knew they were putting on on act, an act built up while he was making his pasear across the Nations. Doc and Nan watched from the card table. She looked nervous. The barkeep edged away along the bar.

"Dammit, Tony," Pete repeated. "What ails you?"

"I won't shake hands with that stinker," the breed exploded. "He's the jasper I was tellin' you about, Pete, the one who ambushed me an' stole my money."

"Tony, you're drunk," Pete snapped.

"I ain't either. I told you three days ago I got robbed, didn't I? Hell, everybody heard me. I told you what he looked like, with them white eyebrows like that, an' that white scar along his chin."

"Yeah, that's right," Pete agreed, putting on his severe and sanctimonious air again. "How much did he take off'n you, Tony?"

"Hell, I told yuh," Tony roared, building up his rage. "Ten thousand bucks, my own hard-earned cash—cattle money. Mister, shell out or—"

"Let's not have any trouble," Pete said piously. "Mebbe he kin explain it." He turned to Mark. "Looks like you walked into a tight, mister. That figure jibes with what you claim you're carryin'. Whatchuh got to say about that?"

Mark grinned. "I'd say it was quite an act."

Either the breed or some confederate had gotten facts and figures in Dodge and beaten him across the Indian country by three days so Tony could spread the story about his fake loss and prod Mark into a shoot-out. That was what it was building up to.

"I want my cash," Tony snarled.

"Come an' git it," Mark invited. He didn't move. He kept his elbows braced on the bar, his back firm against it.

"Let's not have any shootin'," Pete breathed.

"I got my money here in my money belt, Tony. Come an' git it, if you got the guts."

Thunder still rolled in the sky. Rain spattered on the roof and windows. All the way across the Indian country Mark had been thinking about his money; reckoning how his

plan would shape up, how the first move would be made.

Busy Pete had put his faith in a breed's draw. Pete probably didn't much care how it came out, because, if this didn't work, there would be other moves, until Pete had his loot—or the cattle trail Lucy's Well straddled like a venomous snake would be cleared of renegades. This shoot-out would either start or end Mark Sherry's fight.

The breed made the move Mark was waiting for. It was fast, but not fast enough. Both guns blasted, Mark's first, but, in the end, his speed meant nothing. His shot went wild because a whiskey bottle came from the card table and caught him in the skull. At that, he hit the breed's gun and sent it through the window behind him. Tony's slug caught Mark in the arm. Sherry realized what had happened to Tony's gun. Knew he could take time with his next shot. Before he could get it off, his head seemed to split wide open with pain and he fell flat on his face on the floor.

CHAPTER TWO

Gunman's Shadow

MARK had a hunch, after he came to and got his bearings, that Doc Quick had thrown the bottle. Sherry was stripped to the waist; his money belt had been rifled. His arm was bandaged from shoulder to elbow. His head ached. Everything was a blur in front of him.

"Take it easy," Doc ordered. "Don't git yourself in an uproar."

"Where's my money?"

"It'd be hard to guess, son. Just flatten out an' take it easy."

Gradually, Doc Quick came into focus. Nan Crell was standing beside him. The room was small, evidently a section in the rear of the deadfall where Big Charlie stored gear and liquor. Barrels and boxes were piled high in the corner.

"Where's that breed?" Mark demanded.

"He's outside. We got you in here because Nan figured it would take some privacy to git hold of bandage material." Doc chuckled briefly, and Nan flushed. "We kept them jaspers out, but they'll be bustin' down the door in a minute."

"Where's my gun?"

Doc didn't tell him. He said Mark's arm was in bad shape, and he would have to carry it in a sling. "I saved some of the bandage material to make one."

Doc had made the sling of what was left of Nan's petticoat; had rigged it so the lace fringes showed around the edge. Mark glanced at Nan, and tried to get off a grin. "It'll be an honor," he told her.

"For me, too," she smiled back.

"We ain't got time for purty speeches," Quick broke in. "Now, look, mister, these are instructions. You keep that arm wrapped till you git home, an' git to a doctor. Don't monkey with it yourself, or you're apt to lose it."

Mark Sherry snapped, "What I can't figure out is why you give a damn. You flung that bottle, an' damn' near brained me, an' now you—"

"He didn't," the girl put in. "I—I did. I threw it. I didn't mean to hit you, but I wanted to spoil your aim."

Mark stared.

"Tony—Tony's a friend of mine."

Mark said bluntly, "I don't believe it."

"Flatten out, son," Doc said suddenly. "Here they come."

Busy Pete bellowed at the door, and Doc opened it up. "I think you got a surprise comin', Pete," Quick said. "He ain't very well heeled."

The breed reached for the money belt, and ripped it from Sherry's body with a jerk. "Damned thing's empty all right," he muttered.

"Where's the dinero, Doc?" Busy Pete inquired.

Doc shook his head. "He musta pulled a whizzer, Pete," he said unsteadily.

Pete's eyes narrowed. "What's the trouble, Doc? You got the shakes?"

"Oh, no, I'm okay. But he's got a bad arm, an' it makes me kinda nervous."

"Don't git foxy in yore old age, Quick."

"I'm not."

"That fat slob," Tony blustered, "he—"

"Shut up!" Pete's voice got an edge to it. "Where's the money, Doc?"

"Don't git yourself in a stew, Pete. You can't stand it. I won't be responsible."

"I'm cool," Busy Pete claimed. "I ain't in a stew. I'm just askin' yuh."

Doc quivered visibly under the strain. His fat hands twitched at his sides. He mopped his forehead. "I wish you'd have come in here with us in the first place, Pete, so you could see for yourself."

"Wish I had, too," Busy Pete simpered at Nan. "Give the jasper a good goin' over, Tony."

TONY made it thorough, but it didn't produce the money. He finally gave up with an oath, and a slap in the mouth.

"Don't slap me around, you damn' buzzard," Sherry snarled.

Tony slapped him again. Pete shoved him away. "Git away from him, stupid." He turned to Mark. "You kin pull yore freight. Do it pronto."

"You sure I ain't walkin' off with the money, eh?" Mark growled.

"If I wasn't, you wouldn't go. I give everything you got out there at the hitchrack a good goin' over, an' there ain't nothin' there I couldn't git better somewhere else. Now pull out, an' keep goin'. Somebody's pulled a whizzer, but I don't figure it was you."

Mark struggled to his feet. He looked at Nan, then at Doc, and then back at the girl again. There wasn't any friendliness now. Only dread that he wouldn't realize Pete's off-hand viciousness, and still try to make a fight of it. He gave her a rueful grin and turned away.

Doc stepped forward and adjusted the sling over Mark's head. The lace fringes didn't get a grin from anyone, but Mark spared one for himself when he felt something hard wrapped up inside—the barrel and butt of a gun.

"Take care of that arm," Doc said, significantly. "You may git into trouble on the trail if you ain't careful."

"Yeah," Mark said. "Yeah, I will." He knew it was a warning. In all probability, Busy Pete wasn't letting him go at all. He probably had him marked for bushwhack death, and Doc knew it, and wanted him to have a chance. The breed started searching the room. Doc tried to walk out with Mark, but Pete ordered him back, and Mark walked out alone, closing the door behind him. The barkeep watched him as he walked past the bar, but didn't say a word. The odd-job man Busy Pete called Monk Holt didn't look up. The other one, Archie Kane, was gone. Big Charlie was waiting on the gallery steps outside. He handed Mark the note he had tacked up.

"Keep it, son," he remarked, "an' when you feel another brag comin' on, read it."

Mark stuffed it in his pocket and rode off. Back in the room he had left, Busy Pete, like a dog at a bone, got down to business again. "Why'd you side Tony?" he asked Nan.

She said she could see Tony was going to get the worst of it. That was her reason.

"Hell, I seen that, too, but I didn't butt in, did I? "

"Well, I did." She shrugged impatiently, as if she didn't quite understand why she had done it, and braced herself for the next question. Doc was watching her, and tried to distract Pete's attention, but Pete told him to shut up, and speak only when he was spoken to. Then he turned on Tony. "How you know he had that dinero on him when he came in here?"

"I know he did. Jackie Joe seen him git paid off for his stock in Dodge. He seen him buy a money belt at Heeker's Mercantile. He trailed him all the way, an' he didn't cache the money nowhere. He had it on him when he come in here."

"I wouldn't trust Jackie Joe further'n I kin see to shoot. Damned breed, too."

Tony's anger flared visibly, but he kept his mouth shut about it. "I played it the way you wanted, Pete. Everything went off the way you wanted. I wouldn't double-cross you, Pete."

"You hadn't better never try it." Busy Pete didn't raise his voice, but there was the whisper of death in his words.

"I'd have blowed his brains out if she hadn't throwed that bottle," Tony blustered.

Busy Pete said, "Now you kin talk, Doc. You drug him in here an' shut the door in our faces."

"I had to have some bandage material, Pete, you know that. You know how it is."

"Purty damned persnickety," Pete stated, with a sour look at Nan. "You could have throwed the money outa the window, couldn't you?" He went over and took a look. "Hell, that winder's nailed shut. You know, Doc, I'll take that dinero right outa yore hide if I don't find it. You know how I am."

DOC'S fat limp hands began to shake. Obviously he dreaded the ordeal confronting him. Pete didn't show whom, or what, he be-

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lieved. His thoughts were running wild like a hound on a scent.

He looked like a banty-rooster with flustered tail-feathers. He looked like a clown, but no one in the room could get a laugh out of it because they knew the man was vicious.

"Stomach or no stomach," he reminded doc, "you'll catch hell if I make up my mind you had a hand in this."

"I know the damned old tub o' lard done it," Tony flared.

Pete hauled off and slashed Tony across the face with the back of his hand. "Now shut up for a while," he muttered. "I'm thinkin'. I really think you done it, Doc. That's the way she begins to add up."

"He had nothing to do with it," Nan said.

"An' how do you know, dearie?"

"I was right here."

"Yeah. Mebbe you done it."

She smiled. "Maybe I did. Maybe you'd like to search me."

"We may git around to that." Busy Pete said.

"She had nothing to do with it," Doc Quick put in.

"Hell, no. Nobody had nothin' to do with it, but the money's gone." For the first time his temper began to get the best of him, and he put his hand over his stomach to ease a cramp.

"Watch yourself, Pete," Doc warned. "No excitement, you know!"

Doc Quick was playing the only card he had. When Pete finally added the whole thing up, he swung on Tony. "It could be you cleaned him out somewhere up the trail in Injun country, you an' Jackie Joe."

"I wouldn't double-cross you, Pete," the breed said sullenly.

Pete slammed his fist down. "Damned if I don't think you did it, you an' Jackie Joe. You was up-country, an' you're both natural-born coyotes, an' neither of you've got good sense. You think I'm easy-goin' because I don't rant an' roar."

"No, Pete, no. I don't think that. You got me all wrong. I wouldn't do nothin' that ain't square an' honest, Pete. No, no, don't—"

Pete suddenly slashed him across the face, kicked him in the shins, all the while calling the man every name he thought of.

"I never saw the beat—you, gutless, yeller snake. Stand up, will yuh? You want me to shoot yuh down like a dog? Why don't yuh draw? You make me sick to my stomach. Goddelmighty, I'm goin' to kill yuh, just to git you outa my sight."

"I ain't got no gun," Tony whined. "That jasper shot it outa my hand."

"Give him a gun, Doc."

"I ain't got one, Pete."

Pete threw one of his own guns at Tony, butt-first. But Tony's nerve had cracked and what sense he had deserted him. He let the gun fall on the floor; then he spun around and dived headlong through the window. The breed raced along the building to the tie-rack, and a second later his spur-raked paint horse pounded out of town.

Pete turned to Doc and cackled, "He probably didn't do it, Doc," he announced. "He'd have spilled his guts before he took a whuppin'. That's the way Tony is. So it leaves it up to you, Doc. You better speak up before I go hog-wild. I'll gun-whip yuh. I'll slash yuh to pieces. By God, I'll cut yuh open so that fat'll ooze right outa yuh."

"Don't touch me, Pete. I—I—" Doc Quick swallowed hard, but he couldn't go on. His hands began to shake. His flabby face turned white. Pete moved straight at him, and hit him on the left cheekbone with the heel of his hand. "You're a comical guy, Doc, but you can't laugh this off, an' you can't take it. It ain't no use tryin'."

DOC, though, stood up to quite a bit of it. He finally went down on the floor and Pete spur-raked him from chest to crotch. He drove the toe of his boot into the rolls of fat and made the fat man wince with agony and humiliation.

Pete never found out just how much he could take, because Nan Crell stopped him. She grabbed his arm, and pushed him clear across the room against the barrels.

"Stop it!" she cried. "I can prove he had nothing to do with it. I can prove Tony double-crossed you." Her voice had an hysterical pitch, but she tried to keep it under control. "Y-you've got to listen to me."

"Go ahead. I'm listenin'."

She said her name wasn't Nan Crell. It was Nan Tonterro, from south Texas. "I came up here to find my father."

"True Tonterro?" Pete asked. His voice had taken an edge on it.

The girl nodded. "He made a drive from down there to Dodge not so long ago with five thousand head of his own stock, and a lot of vented irons, too. He reached Dodge safely, and started home, with five men, and his cattle money, but he never got there. I think he got as far as Lucy's Well, and that's why I'm here."

"The double-crossin' buzzard," Pete muttered. "Tony never told me. Hell, a drive like that'd run up to a hundred thousand dollars!"

"Tony didn't say anything about it because he wanted to handle it alone. He's got Comanche renegades in his pay you don't know anything about. They killed off the punchers my father had with him—all except one—and he got home to tell me about it. They didn't

kill Dad because he cached the money. Tony's holding him until he finds out where it is. That's why I'm here, trying to find out where Tony's got his hideout. That's why I sided him against the stranger, because, if Tony got killed in the shoot-out. I'd never find my father alive. That's why I took a hand."

"I should have killed him," Pete muttered. "I should have tore his throat out." He gave Nan a sudden back-handed slap. "Monk'll keep an eye on you," he told them, and walked through the door.

Nan sagged in a chair. The sting of the blow had sent tears down her cheeks. She dropped her face in her hands and sobbed. Doc put a hand on her shoulder.

"I don't say I could've took it, Nan," he said, "but you should've let me try. Now Pete'll try to trail Tony, and if he finds him your father'll be worse off than before."

Nan lifted her head, and tried to smile. "It's all right, Doc. I couldn't let the stranger go through with it. It was my idea wrapping in the bandage the money he had in his money belt so he could escape with it."

Doc shook his head. "I don't know whatever put the idea in your head. It was an awful risk."

"I—I think I know," Nan answered, with a little catch in her breath, "It might surprise you, Doc."

"No," Doc said, "I don't think it would."

"Do you think he'll be all right?"

Doc pursed his lips. He had been looking out the window when Mark rode off, had seen Archie Kane follow out of town, but he decided he wouldn't say anything about it.

CHAPTER THREE

Promise to the Dead

MARK Sherry couldn't figure what had happened to his money. Doc and the girl hadn't taken it. Quick wouldn't have given him the gun if he had. He glanced down at the lace fringes of Nan's petticoat and grinned wryly. There was something going on in Lucy's Well that he didn't understand.

"I'm goin' back," he told himself, "an' hear her sing."

Doc Quick had done a good job on the bandage. It felt snug and comfortable, and braced Sherry's arm so he could ride fairly easily. And Quick had taken a big chance hiding the gun in the sling.

He looked around at the rimrock fringing the sky and saw a sudden puff of smoke. Then a bullet whistled down and scuffed up dust ahead of him.

The smoke drifted from the rimrock brush. Hoofbeats drifted down like the faint and distant drum of patridge wings.

"So this is what Doc had in mind," Mark muttered, and made for the slot ahead. It was a rough, boulder-strewn passage, and before he got through the bushwhacker rode out from behind a boulder and blocked his way, hand gun leveled. Archie Kane holstered his gun when Mark stopped.

"Don't git the notion," he told Sherry, "I couldn't have made a better job of that first shot."

Archie was dark and lithe and not more than twenty.

"Looks to me," Mark observed, "like you ain't got much respect for yore elders."

"Hell, you ain't no older'n I am," Kane said.

"If you came out here to drygulch me, why don't you git at it?"

"I wouldn't drygulch nobody," Kane said. "Not even that ornery breed snake, Tony White Lance."

"You don't cotton to him, eh?" He tried to keep the talk going, looking for an opening.

Archie broke it up. "I ain't here to talk," he announced. "But I want you to understand I don't bushwhack nobody. I'm givin' you a show. I'll throw you a gun, an—"

"Don't bother," Mark broke in. "Start shootin'."

Sherry's move threw Kane off balance. He went for his iron with dazzling speed, and still got his first shot off before Mark did—but wild. Mark's slug knocked Archie out of his saddle. The horse bolted, dragging Kane by one leg until he slammed against a rock, and his body jerked free.

Sherry dismounted and hunkered down beside him. Kane was bleeding badly from a chest wound.

"Cripes!" he muttered. "Where in hell did yuh git that gun?"

"Doc gave it to me, kid," Mark told him.

"Guess I'm headin' for the sand hills, ain't I?"

"It looks that-away."

"I musta broke my damn neck. I can't feel nothin' but an ache in my head." He didn't look even twenty now with the tough look gone out of his face. "You stickin' with me till it's over?"

Mark Sherry just looked at him.

"You aimin' to head back to Lucy's Well?" Kane asked.

"I had it in mind."

"I'm thinkin' about the girl back there, an' that damned Tony. He's goin' to git hold of her, first chance he gits. I was aimin' to fix him. You could do it for me."

"I almost did," Sherry said, "if she hadn't butted in. I don't understand that mixup."

Kane said, "She ain't what she says. Her name's Nan Tonterro. She's lookin' for her

old man. He got ambushed in the Nations. Tony done it, him an' another breed named Jackie Joe. She knows that much, 'cause I told her. If you'd killed him, she would've been up a stump. That's why she took a hand.

"She trailed Tony a couple times, as far as Sorrow Creek, an' then lost him. If she ain't in town when you git back, you take a pasear over to that Creek. Tony's got his hideout there somewhere. I've tried to find it, but never had no luck. Watch out for Tony. He's snake-mean. Busy Pete's a parson alongside of him. Next time she trails 'em, Tony an' Jackie Joe are goin' to—to—"

"I'm goin' back," Mark said, raising his voice because he wasn't sure Archie could hear him any more. "I'm goin' back."

"I never even got started courtin' her," Archie went on. "I didn't have the gall, because I ain't any good." The dying man was whispering now. His face twisted painfully on every word. "Busy Pete got me into throwin' a wide loop," he went on. "He showed me how to use a gun. I was just a button . . . . It was okay, till she came along. Then it all changed. I knew I had to do somethin', but I didn't think this 'ud be it. I had a notion I'd turn on them, an' clean my nose that-away. Mebbe it couldn't be done, anyway. But you ride back—an' raise hell!"

Archie Kane, small time gunman, died then.

Mark held him a moment longer. "I'll ride for you, kid," he said . . . .

PIKE Magee had three thousand head of Star-and-Bar stock in the drive he was making to Dodge City. "And a headache," he told himself, "for every critter in the herd."

Renegades, fake cutters, bunch quitters and homesick sprouts in his crew had bedeviled him clear across Texas. By now he was as suspicious of strangers as a wronged girl, and he said he would shoot the next man who so much as looked cross-eyed at one of his cows.

"I won't parley with nobody till I git to Dodge an' dicker for a price," he told Mark Sherry. "That's all the parleyin' I'll do. Shag it."

It took some time for Sherry to cool Magee down. He said his horse had torn a hoof in a chuckhole, and he had had to shoot the animal, then and there. "I've been a-foot a couple hours. I saw yore dust an' headed this way. I'm bound for Lucy's Well."

"First time I ever heard of anybody goin' there of his own free will," Magee said.

"That's where I lost my shirt. I'm goin' back after it, if I kin git a horse."

"If it ain't a cow somebody wants, it's a horse. Well, look over the bunch an' help yoreself. Tell the wrangler I said so. Keep yore hands off'n the big roan, though."

"Thanks," Mark said. "I'll pick out the least likely. I can't even pay for a crowbait."

All at once, Magee got an idea. Sherry could see it grow in his eyes. "Take a good one," Pike Magee said. "You got to work it out, anyway. That's the only way I do business."

There was a sudden silence. Magee kept his eyes on the distant horizon, and whistled an off-key tune. Mark didn't have much time to waste, but he needed a horse, and Pike looked as if he would stick to his guns. He was probably short-handed, and figured this was a way to help piece a crew together.

Mark chuckled suddenly. "Okay," he said. "Gun wages is all I work for. Fifty a day!"

"Ye Gods!" Pike exploded. "Shot with my own bullet." Then he laughed, too. "Okay, it all helps. I can't pay you, either, till we git to Dodge. But I need help. All I got is snot-noses, big on brag an' full of bellyaches. I need somebody who kin see me through a tight."

"If one turns up before I earn my horse, I'll give you a hand," Sherry promised.

"It's bound to," Pike muttered.

They crossed Sorrow Creek at early dark and bedded down on the far side. Magee's crew were mostly sprouts that wanted to go home. Mark would have called Magee a fool, except that he knew how hard it was to get good men when the war had taken such a heavy toll.

"You might make out," he told Magee, "if you run into a spell of real good luck, and it holds out til you git to Dodge."

"That's what I'm bankin' on," Pike admitted.

His luck ran out, though, the next morning. It was damp and chill, and mist tatters curled out of the tules. The cook was cussing his smoky fire, and two young cowpokes who had ridden the first night trick were wrangling over something that had happened on the bedground during the night when three riders came out of the mist, and pulled up almost within gunshot of camp.

"Great balls of living fire!" Pike exploded, "Comanche Injuns! Where's my gun?"

"Take it easy," Mark warned. "They want to parley."

"I won't parley with nobody."

"They wouldn't ride in so close if there weren't more in the tules to back 'em up," Mark told him.

Magee, sided by his trail boss, Bill Williams, and Sherry, moved forward. "We'll each take a man if they git ornery," Pike stated. "You take—"

"The herd's bedded down on open ground, boss," Williams warned, "but they're pinched in right an' left by low ground. It'd be a helluva note if they started movin'. They could git scattered clear from hell to break-

fast, and it'd be the devil's own chore to git them herded up again."

"They ain't a-goin' to git scattered," Pike roared. "Don't mention it. I don't like to hear it."

"It's apt to happen, boss," Bill insisted gloomily. "Mebbe you better make some kind of a deal with 'em, if it sounds reasonable."

"Why in hell did you bed down here if it ain't a good place?" Pike complained.

"Because you told me to."

"Well, why'd you pay any attention? This is Injun country."

"'Tain't either. We ain't in the Nations."

"Well, there they are."

The chief wore only one feather in his hair, and a breech clout around his middle. His face was daubed with paint. He rode a paint horse, and was loaded for bear, a scalping knife in his belt, repeating rifle in his hands, and two good hoglegs strapped to his bare legs. He said he wanted three hundred wohaws toll for letting the drive go through.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hell Camp

THE minute he opened his mouth, Mark recognized Tony White Lance. One of the other two looked like a breed, too—Jackie Joe, probably. Tony must have recognized Mark, with his arm in a sling, and his sun-bleached eyebrows, but he didn't let on. His purpose, right now, was to try to pry Pike loose from some cattle.

Pike roared and blustered, claimed he wouldn't pay toll to the devil himself for passage out of hell, but he probably made some mental reservations, because the tules swished suspiciously.

Sherry kept his mouth shut. If he said anything about Tony, it was apt to make things worse instead of better. The sprouts in camp herded together in a small, watching half-circle near the night picket line, waiting for word from Magee.

Pike might have made a deal, but he held off too long, and some rattle-brain off on the bedground started firing. Instantly, Mark heard the rumble and clack of moving stock. The war whoop sounded in the tules, and blurred figures came running. Tony and his bucks swung away. Tony fired and the slug caught Pike in the leg. Tony yelled something, and pointed at Mark. Pike's trailboss, who knew the lingo, gave him a suspicious look.

"That jasper says you're his man," Williams called. "He told his bucks to lay off. If he means what it sounds like, you better clear out, pronto."

"I ain't his man till he plugs me," Mark muttered.

"Balls of fire!" Pike roared. "Who fired that shot off there?"

No one knew. Tony's rifle *spanged* again, and this time Tommy Lunn, half-mounted, went down, shot between the eyes.

"My God! Molly Lunn's boy!" Magee bawled.

"Pull yoreself together, boss," Williams hollered, "or you won't git home a-tall."

"I been through this before," Pike snapped back. "I know how to act. I kin complain, can't I?"

Tony's mounted bucks came out of the tules and started to circle, but the growing stampede broke up their plans. Stray cattle cut through them. Pike claimed they could make a fight of it on higher ground, if they could reach it.

"If we got clear of the tules an' brush they ain't got the strength to box us in. Come on, boys, let's make a try."

The rush cost him two men, but his plan was sound. Mark lost sight of Tony, and cut diagonally into live oak shinnery to find him. He caught a glimpse of the breed on his paint horse, swooping in and out of brush, a war-whoop bugling out of his throat, then lost sight of him again. But he ran head on into the two bucks who had stood in on the parley.

Mark clubbed one to the ground before he could raise his gun. The other lit out in a panic, head-down on the offside of his mount. A Star-and-Bar-branded horse came out of thick brush, spooked and empty-saddled, blood along its buckskin flank. Mark went in where the animal came out, and found Tony on the ground, scalping knife lifted, his free hand twisted into a shock of red hair.

Mark fired and the knife leaped out of the breed's hand, like his gun in the Trailboss in Lucy's Well. He spun, and snarled his fury. Mark rode in and kicked him down so he couldn't dive into the brush.

"I ought to fill yore rotten carcass full of lead, Tony," he growled. "but I'll give you one chance to git outa this alive. Grab it fast. I won't chew the fat. You want to make a deal?"

"What d'you want?"

"True Tonterro."

Tony started with surprise, then his eyes narrowed. "I don't know nobody like that. I never—"

Mark's gun came to cock. Tony changed his tune. "I—I'll do it."

"Climb yore horse. One mismove, and I'll drill you. Throw down that rifle an' yore hand guns. Keep outa sight. Move slow. If anybody sees us, I'll shoot you down. Start moving."

They cleared the brush. No one was in sight. The fight was moving up the slope.

Tony led Mark into the tules again, where mired cattle bawled frantically. Mark caught a glimpse of Sorrow Creek, but Tony zigzagged away again toward higher land. Finally they crossed a hogback and entered a shallow wash that grew deeper as they moved along and took on the sheer-walled look of a canyon.

"How much farther?" Mark asked.

"Not much."

"Any bucks left in camp?"

Tony shook his head. "Nothin' but some squaws an' kids."

"It better be true."

"We made a deal. I'll stick to it."

"As long as I got my gun in yore back."

Suddenly Tony swung sideways and entered a slot. Stirrups scraped both walls, but it finally widened out into a box canyon, and Mark saw ramshackle huts and tepees huddled in a circle near one wall. Mark halted. A dog barked, and gave the alarm. A squaw came out of a tepee, looked around, and went back inside.

"It's up to you, Tony. We're ridin' in, and if anybody butts in, you git shot first."

"Nobody's goin' to butt in. Them damn' squaws hate my guts."

"I can't blame 'em for that."

"I ain't responsible," Tony began to whine. "Stubborn old buzzard. He won't talk, an' them bucks go after him when I ain't around. I ain't touched a hair on his head."

"You tryin' to tell me Tonterro's in bad shape?"

"I ain't touched him. It was Busy Pete who—"

A snarling dog popped out at them from the brush. A second lurked behind a rock, and several more snapped at one another in front of a hut. A naked boy darted from behind a rock into the nearest tepee. The whole place reeked of rotting flesh. Mark surmised they gorged on stolen wohaws, and left what they didn't want to spoil. He steeled himself against the stench and rode in.

Tony pointed at a piece of ground a short distance from the tepees. Mark stared at a heap of gnawed bones, shredded clothes and raw, scrabbled ground. In the middle of the refuse a man was staked out on the earth, buffalo horns and rawhide thongs holding him down.

Sherry said softly, "By God—if I hadn't made a deal—"

"You made it," Tony whined.

"Cut him loose, you dirty damned buzzard."

"I ain't got a knife."

"Yell for one."

Tony called for a knife, and the same boy Mark had seen before threw one at Tony's feet, then darted back to safety. White Lance bent down and cut the thongs and a thin sigh escaped the man on the ground.

True Tonterro didn't move for some time. Finally, one thin hand came up, and from its own weight fell down again across his chest. A knee kinked, then straightened again, like a steel spring, and scattered the rubble of bones.

"Damned things got all tightened up," were the first words he spoke.

Then he cussed and groaned, and again tried to stand on his feet. Mark attempted to help him, but Tonterro wouldn't have it.

"I kin make it, son. Don't help me. Watch that snake. I kin make it. There—by God!"

True was naked to the waist. Shreds of clothing hung around his legs. His chest was scratched and bitten.

"I want to git you outa here as quick as I kin," Mark told him, "but I don't know what to do with this breed. He's apt to double-cross me one way or another."

"Shoot him," True said.

"I would," Mark answered, "if I hadn't made a deal."

"I didn't," True spoke up, "If I had the strength I'd tear his throat out. Give me that gun."

"No."

"You can't go back on yore deal," the breed bleated.

"Keep yore mouth shut," Mark snapped, "or I will."

"I'll brain him with a bone," True put in.

"We kin tie him up an' run off the horses," Mark said. "What about the squaws and kids?"

"They won't help him."

"What d'you say?"

True considered it for some time. "Yeah," he finally agreed with a glint in his eye that Mark didn't see. "Yeah, we could do that."

"Stretch out there Tony, in the same spot," Mark ordered.

"I'll tie him," True said. "I'll enjoy doin' it." He made a job of it, too, with strips of rawhide off his own wrists.

Mark watched the huts and tepees, and drove off the spare horses. The dogs kept their distance, snarling. True finally got to his feet, staggered around in a circle, testing his legs, but they wouldn't hold him, and Mark lifted him up on Tony's horse.

"We've got to move fast," Sherry clipped. "The squaws're apt to turn him loose when we're out of sight."

"They won't," Tonterro panted. "They got it in for him for takin' their men away from Black Horse. An' other reasons. I've seen him lash one of them to ribbons. He'll do it agin when he gits free, when the bucks git back an' let him go. You ought to shoot him, son. I mean it. He—"

"I made a deal," Sherry reminded him.

True nodded reluctantly. Mark saw he had something on his mind. True circled the heap of rubble and bones, then headed for the nearest tepee, rode in through the flap and came out with a chunk of raw meat. He headed straight for Tony again, pushed the clumsy piece off the saddle square onto Tony's face and then rode off with Mark.

Mark said nothing. Any man gone through what True had was apt to be a little touched. True had been staked out for a month.

"Rain or shine, hot or cold, there I lay, by God. I got bushwhacked, in the first place, up north a piece, by him an' a jasper named Jackie Joe, but I knowed beforehand it was comin', an' cached my cash. That's why they staked me out that-away, to git me to speak my piece. But I held out.

"All the time he was doublecrossin' Busy Pete Alter. I heard him an' Jackie Joe talkin' about it. Last night he come back hell-a-kittin'. He an' Pete had had a ruckus of some kind. He was goin' after me hammer an' tongs, but the bucks had a deal cooked up for this mornin' against Magee's drive."

His talk sounded rational. Mark said he knew about the ruckus in Lucy's Well, and the raid on Pike Magee's herd. "They're fightin' it out right now. I corraled Tony, and fetched him out to this hideout."

"You should have shot the hellion," True stated again. "You seen me throw that beef in his face. Last night he loaded me down with that damned stuff til I thought I'd cave in, an' then the whole bunch pulled out."

"So you thought you'd git even with him," Mark said.

True shrugged. "Could be. Partly, anyway. A squaw used to come out at night and wash my face. That's part of it, too."

Mark frowned. True's words were beginning to sound incoherent. He was ahead of Mark and starting to move faster. Sherry tried to slow him down for fear he'd get thrown, but True wouldn't hold back. He acted as if the devil was on his heels. And then, all at once, everything he had said and done made sense. A wild howl of agony and terror reached out at them from behind, like a clawing hand. Mark pulled up. True swung around, and came back.

"That's the deal," he muttered. "I figgered we could clear out before it happened, but there it is."

"What's going on?"

True pointed at the marks on his chest. "That didn't grow there. Them dogs did it, wrangling for beef. Tony an' his bucks used to throw beef at me, and watch the dogs go after it. He made 'em mean a-purpose, think-

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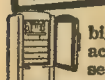

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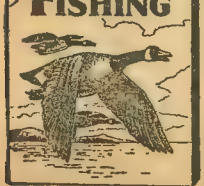

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in' they'd take it out on me, but they're takin' it out on him instead. I figgered they would."

CHAPTER FIVE

Breed's Last Trail

MARK'S spine prickled at the sound. Tony's howls sounded through the wash like echoes out of inferno. The snarl of dogs beat around Tony's yells. True stared bleakly off at the sky, until the sound suddenly stopped. Then True rode on again, at a steadier gait, as though the reason for hurry had gone.

"Mebbe I'll live to regret what I did," he muttered, "but I don't think so. I'd rather have shot him down, but you wouldn't allow it, so I figgered somethin' else out."

"I see I didn't need to worry about yore brains workin'," Mark said wryly.

True laughed mirthlessly. "I went off in a cloud once in a while, but it didn't last long."

"What I can't figure out is why they tore him apart, and wouldn't touch you."

"I had that figgered out to. I got scratched up some, but they never took a real chunk outa my hide. I dunno. It could be because I was beat up like they was. Mebbe beaten things side each other."

"Could be," Mark agreed.

"And they hated Tony's guts. That figgered in it."

Mark suddenly pulled up again. This time the sound he heard came from farther up the wash, funneled toward them by the sheer walls—the beat of hoofs on sod and stone.

"Tony's bucks comin' back," Mark guessed. "Pike must've beat them off."

"We'll know in a minute," True answered. "They're comin' round the point."

Mark looked around. "We could use some cover, if there was any."

True chuckled briefly. "I could use a gun—if I had one."

Mark's guess was wrong. The riders weren't renegade Comanches. They were Busy Pete's hardcases, trailing Tony to his hideout. Pete probably thought True was Tony because he was riding the breed's paint. He swung to the far side of the wash, sitting his horse like a bug on a rock, feet flung forward as if he were trying to get some speed out of the animal by kicking it in the jaw. Gun close to his belly, he shot at True, but missed. The bullet rammed into the talus and set up a cascade of rubble. Pete at last saw his mistake and cussed.

"Where in hell's Tony?" he bellowed, and then he suddenly recognized Mark, and threw a slug at him. "Damn that Archie!" he howled. "That no-good tramp!"

"He tried," Mark yelled back. "But it's up to you now, Pete. Do yore own dirty chores." He fired.

Pete dodged. Mark thought he had hit him. Pete's horse reared and went over backward. Pete jumped free. The horse threshed violently, but couldn't get to its feet. Pete headed up the slanting talus on the far side of the wash. Halfway up he squatted with his rifle and two hand guns, ready for all comers. Monk Holt raced toward him, and called out something. Mark couldn't understand what. Then he wheeled again and headed some distance up the wash, ignoring Mark and True.

"I don't get it," Mark muttered. "What're they up to? Why don't they close in an' shoot us down?"

"Damned funny performance," True agreed.

A second later, though, Mark caught the drift. Pike Magee's young punchers had beaten off Tony's raiders and were driving what was left of them down the wash.

"This is going to be a mess," Mark muttered. "Here come Pike's bunch, too."

"Balls of living fire!" True exploded.

BUSY Pete's gang opened up on the Comanches from in front, and Pike's cowpokes from behind. The bucks scattered to the walls, singly and by twos. Mark noticed that they had lost at least half their men. Busy Pete hunkered down against the talus and started picking them off with his rifle. He shot three in a row when they tried to work past below him, and with Pike's men behind it just about cleaned out the raiders.

Two more got caught in a razzle-dazzle of fire in the center of the wash, and milled around in a tight circle until their riddled bodies toppled to the ground. Then one of Busy Pete's men fired at Pike's young sprouts, and the battle was on. Pete tried to pick Mark off so his men could get through and take to the brush. An occasional slug popped up at him and raised a puff of dirt, like heavy rain in the dust. He moved several times, probably on the theory that he couldn't push his luck in one spot too hard. Mark zig-zagged back and forth across the wash, blocking all efforts to get past.

"Shoot him down," Monk Holt yelled up at Pete in exasperation. "What's wrong with you? We're catchin' hell from behind, don't yuh know that?"

"Shoot him down yoreself," Pete bellowed. "I ain't got any objections."

Pike's punchers pressed hard from behind, and Piked looked proud of them. If they couldn't pull their weight as cowhands, they were surely Comanche-hating, renegade chasing fools.

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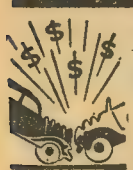

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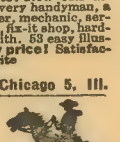

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Monk yelled again, and this time he rode hell-bent to break through the line Mark was holding. Mark roweled forward to meet him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Pete moving again.

Monk saw it, too. "You yeller dog," he bawled up. "You runnin' out on us now?"

It looked like Pete was trying to. He was heading higher up the rubble. If he could climb the last six feet of sheer wall, he would be in the clear and probably could escape. Monk deliberately swung away from his head-on, single-handed charge, and headed for the talus. His horse struck fire on the rocks when he pulled him down. Monk aimed and fired. The bullet jarred Pete. He swung around, braced himself, and his rifle *spanged*. Monk wilted. Both arms leaped outward. His head whipped to his chest. He caved in at the stomach and pitched to the ground.

Pete headed for the ledge again. Monk had guessed right. He was running out on the ruckus, but his bad leg gave way before he reached the top and he tumbled all the way down. He hit bottom with a thud, and a small avalanche of rubble poured down behind him, almost burying him.

Mark rode in. The mound of dirt around Pete exploded, and he lunged up, but he couldn't clear his legs. His gun was in his hand.

"You gotta git up early to trick a old buzzard like me," he bragged through bruised, grimy lips. "Hell, I come down like that a-purpose."

The sound of the two shots beat between the two walls of the wash like the roll of drums. Pete's slug hit Mark in his good arm. Pete braced himself for another shot. Mark got a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. His shocked arm muscles wouldn't move. He couldn't pull the trigger. Pete saw it, and leered.

"There's one thing I'd like to know before you kick in is where that dinero you had went to," he yelled.

"I couldn't say," Mark answered, "and wouldn't if I could." He tried desperately to get his arm out of the sling so he could switch his gun and try a left-handed shot. He managed it, too, but the shot went wild. Pete's dry laugh cackled across the short space between them. Mark steeled himself against Pete's next shot, and couldn't understand why it didn't come.

Pete did, though. He was in worse shape than Mark. The rasping laugh stopped short. His head whipped forward, the way Monk's had done, his waist doubled, but he didn't go all the way down because he was buried hip-deep in rubble. It looked like he was making

an ironic bow, but he was stone dead by the time his head hit the ground. Mark let out a sigh of relief. His first shot had taken hold after all. At that, Busy Pete was the last of his gang to cash in. Mark knew it because Pike Magee was coming toward him, yelling: "We got ourn. How you doin'?"

"Fair to middlin'," Mark yelled back. "Hurry up, catch me. I don't know whether I'm a-foot or horseback!"

DOC Quick massaged his jowls with one fat hand and leaned on the Trailboss bar with the other. He said it was his considered opinion that he would need more bandage to patch Mark up with.

"If there's more where that other came from," he remarked, without giving Nan a look.

"There is not," Nan flared. "What're you trying to do? Take every stitch—uh—uh—use what he's got on his other arm."

"Ye Gods," Doc cried, horrified. "Old bandages on a new wound. Never!"

"You know just as well as I do he didn't have more than a scratch on that other arm, and that bandage is perfectly good, but—I—I'll get some more."

Nan retired. Doc chuckled and spread his fat hands on the Trailboss bar. "In the meantime," he said, "let's all have a drink. Vic, give me some of the special concoction I stirred up for Busy Pete."

The barkeep gave him a horrified look. "But Doc—"

"No argument, Vic. I gone strictly teetotal, so help me! And I'll need help, believe me." His face was bruised, and his ears redder than cardinal's wings in the sunshine because Busy Pete had beaten him up so hard. He had two black eyes, the skin was gouged off his face, and his neck had fingermarks around it, but he looked happy as a lark, with the venom of fear and shame gone out of his

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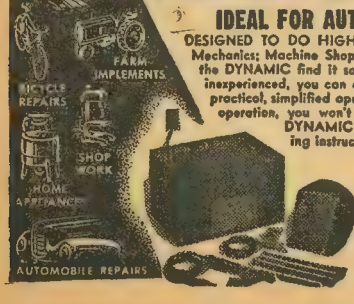

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system. So did Mark, for more than one reason.

They lined up at the bar, and when they could spare the time from looking at Nan they discussed ways and means of gathering the Magee herd again. Mark said he could help before he headed for home.

"Hell, if I've got one good arm I can do it. By the way, Doc, I thought you told me that arm was like to be the death of me."

"We did," Doc admitted, "but it was a windy." He tried to edge away from the topic. "Lucy's took a bath, boys—I mean Lucy's Well got cleaned up, an' I'm going to git out my paint brush an' put a new sign on my house."

"What'll you make it, Doc?" True inquired, "Seems kinda comical the way it is." True had had himself barbered, and bathed, and felt just like his old self again, he claimed. He figured on going back into The Nations with Pike Magee as soon as they got the stock out of the tules of Sorrow Creek, and reclaiming his cache.

"It's comical, but it's rowdy," Doc insisted. He frowned and thought aloud; "I ain't sure what I'll say. Mebbe 'Lucy's Well—thanks, boys.' Sounds kinda lousy, but that's about what I mean."

Nan came back into the room with a petticoat over her arm, and, of course, all Pike Magee's young sprouts eyed her until she could hardly look up. She handed Doc the garment, and he started to slit it up.

"I still don't understand why you bandaged me up before if I didn't get shot bad?" Mark repeated.

"Hell, show him, Nan," Doc said. "Here's the scissors. You cut that one off while I put this one on."

Nan slit the bandage, and started to remove it, layer after layer. Under each one of them, lay a sheaf of bills that fluttered to the bar like autumn leaves, and when Nan was through they made a substantial heap that doc said tallied up to the full amount Mark had had in his money belt.

"We try to be exact in such matters," he remarked. "If it was in your money belt, it's there in that heap now. An' you'll git some more to add to it for layin' Busy Pete low."

"If it ain't one thing, its another," Mark said, submitting as gracefully as he could. "Git one arm in shape, an' there goes the other. Just so you don't wrap both of 'em up at the same time."

He turned and looked into Nan's blue eyes, then at the smile she gave him, and, finally, at the size of her waist, and added, "One arm will do me—but I'm apt to need it, pronto."

THE END

(Continued from page 79)

wright's big head to clinch what he meant.

It was a losing fight from the first—one man against six—but Aubrey Yates figured he had a lot at stake. Four years in the mud with Yankee lead singing around his head, four years of devastation and starvation, capped by surrender. They had combined to make Aubrey do a lot of thinking, and one thought was paramount. That was that folks would have to learn to get along with one another. As long as men like Cartwright held the stage that wouldn't be possible. And if peace meant getting himself killed over a section of land and twenty-seven cows. . . . Well, it was worth it. His carbine brought down one of the attackers.

That tally cost him plenty, for Cartwright's men seemed to redouble their efforts to smoke him out. Lead came in from every side and one ball nicked his shoulder, spinning him around. They were trying to force him out into the open, and they were having good success. When the time came he kept his eye on Cartwright—no one else—and he stepped out with his six-shooter blazing its last two shots. The black powder charge smoked up his vision, but he noticed there was no answering fire from Cartwright's gun.

The others hammered him with lead then until he dropped to his knees, and as he knelt, waiting for them to finish him off, the Rebel yell and crashing of brush made him think he was back in the army. But Bill Pruitt's big bay and the flashing guns of the Forked Lightning and Bug men told him differently. He just kept kneeling there and let the battle go on over his head until at last there was only the panting sound of horses and the music of the river. And he waited until Bill Pruitt came over to get him, for he knew he would come.

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that way with Aubrey Yates. There weren't any shadows in the corners of the soddy that night, for six of the boys stayed over. Bill Pruitt had little to say, but he did promise that Bessie would be over to help patch Aubrey up, and there was some talk about Tripp and his family coming over to see how things were going.

Seeing the first plows turn the earth over there in the bottoms while cattle came down to the river to drink did things to Aubrey Yates' heart.

There were a lot of pot-bellied stuffed shirts in Washington talking about the decay of the nation and how it would never recover from the war, but what Aubrey saw from the front of his soddy made a mighty big lie out of that kind of talk. Seemed that all a man needed was a good sense of values coupled with a policy of live and let live, and things would work themselves out all right. That was shaken a little the day he saw the Forked Lightning boys branding the wrong cows again. He hobbled over to the branding fire and made his protest.

"That ain't one of my Bar Y cows, boys," he said, staring at the husky long yearling that was receiving his brand. The Forked Lightning boss looked up and scowled. Two more steers were brought in and again the call of "Bar Y!" rang out.

Again Aubrey Yates protested.

"Lookee here, Yates," the Forked Lightning boss said gruffly. "If you aim to be a cowman, there's one thing you got to learn. Quit bellyachin' about every critter we drag to the fire!" He went back to his work of running a Bar Y on the hip of the bellowing steer.

Bill and Bessie Pruitt sort of explained it to him as he limped back to his bench in front of the soddy. "Trouble with you, Aubrey," Bill Pruitt said, "you don't know nothing about the cow business. I told you we was afraid that cowpen herd of yours would show up with six calves each. Appears that's about what happened."

"But—" Aubrey started to protest.

"I got a black boy and an old stove-up bronc-stomper who'll look after your spread while we're up the trail," Bill said. "The way your herd's growin' you ought to be able to afford a good range bull. Reckon you'll lease grazin' rights on some of this here now government land?"

"Reckon so," Aubrey Yates said. There was a funny lump forming in his throat and his voice squeaked a little when he added, "You folks care to take a cup of Arbuckle with me?"

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